

# CINEFANTASTIQUE

## SCREENING THE IMAGINATION

Week 3: *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), *Vampyr* (1931), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)

### Early Cinema

- Low art form
- Ignored by the intelligentsia

### Surrealism

- Avant-garde
- Element of surprise
- Unexpected juxtapositions
- Non-sequitur
- Free association
- Dream analysis
- The unconscious
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*"a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power and poetic reality."* –

**Pierre Reverdy**

### Dada

- A reaction to the 1<sup>st</sup> World War
- The war was nonsensical, so the only reaction artistically was one that made no sense

### Luis Bunuel

- Son of Spanish landowners
- Established one of the world's first cinema clubs
- Met Dali around 1920
- In 1926 Dali and Bunuel spent three days *'talking about their dreams and unconscious desires'* – Mark Cousins
- They wrote a script about a couple's split and reconciliation
- The film is absurd and in part quite shocking
- It was always Bunuel's intention to shock and insult the intellectual bourgeoisie

*'Historically the film represents a violent reaction against what in those days was called 'avant-garde,' which was aimed exclusively at artistic sensibility and the audience's reason.'*

**Luis Bunuel**

### *Un Chein Andalou* (1929)

*'...a severed hand appears followed by naked breasts and buttocks, and two pianos surmounted by dead donkeys. A caption reads "Sixteen Years Earlier" but the action continues as before. The man with the ants on his hands discovers his mouth is covered with hair, which is contrasted by the woman's shaved armpit.'*

**Mark Cousins**

**Carl T Dreyer**

- ‘Film Production Carl Dreyer’ was formed in 1930
- The financial backing came from Baron Nicholas de Gunzburg

***Vampyr (1932)***

- The ‘unreality’ is key
- An obsession with life and death
- Shadows
- Funerals
- Though the basic elements are there they are distorted into something unrecognizable

*“Imagine that we are sitting in an ordinary room. Suddenly we realise that there is a corpse standing behind the door. At the same moment, the room we are sitting in changes – every single everyday object in it looks different, the light and the atmosphere have changed without having actually changed physically. It is we who have changed and the objects have become what we perceive them to be. This is the effect I want to produce in my film.”*

**Carl T Dreyer**

- To create the ‘unreality’ a piece of tulle was stretched over the camera lens to achieve a ‘bright and foggy’ look

*“The film is a day-dream. I did not have a special purpose, I simply wanted to make a film that was different from all other films...”*

***Frankenstein (1931)*****Cultural and Historical Significance****The Monster**

- A stolen brain in a square head
- Evokes the symbol of ‘old consciousness’ forced to exist in a ‘new paradigm’
- This stylization points to “displaced, suppressed, and reshaped humans to conform with the machine world” – Max Ernst
- The monster could also be said to represent or at least reflect many of the ‘stitched together’ survivors of The Great War

*“Untold millions had been left with the feeling that modern life – and death – was nothing but an anonymous, crushing assembly line... Whale’s film depicted a monster squarely in the grip of this confusion, a pathetic figure caught, as it were, between humanism and mechanism.”*

**David J Skal****The Setting**

- The characters wear modern dress yet are placed in an older gothic landscape
- Ambiguous time setting
- The film is about ‘new technology’ but any signs of new technology are absent – no cars/phones etc.
- As if all the ‘energy’ has been forced into Frankenstein’s machinery

- The Monster – could certainly represent – ‘The other’ or ‘The Outsider’
- Or at least a part of Frankenstein that he doesn’t want to deal with
- The Monster is both created and rejected by the new world

### *The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)*

- Was originally going to be ‘The Return of Frankenstein’
- Whale had no interest in directing it
- When he realized, they weren’t going to let him make the film he wanted, he agreed
- The studio wanted another Frankenstein – what he gave them was an outrageously subversive black comedy
- Much more lavish production
- Bigger budget
- Larger in scale
- A monster that speaks
- Music

In some ways, *Bride of Frankenstein* feels as though it has more in common with Edgar Ulmer’s deeply subversive and supremely nutty *The Black Cat* (1934), than its predecessor. Both *Bride* and *The Black Cat* weave similar kinds of satanically perverse magic, forcing us to cast an eye on sexual taboos, societal repressions and obsessions with death and religion. *Frankenstein*, by comparison is a remarkably quiet affair for much of its run time, not a hint of music exists within the film, aside from the strangely low-key orchestral dirge which rolls along over the opening credits. Some scenes play out almost silently, making the sudden noise of soil being thrown onto a coffin lid feel all the more jarring. *Bride of Frankenstein* in comparison is alive with musical accompaniment. Perhaps spurred on by the likes of the earlier *King Kong* with its innovative Max Steiner film score, Franz Waxman who would later create music for Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*, lavished Whale’s psychosexual monster movie with an attention seeking horror soundscape, each of the key characters heralded by custom made orchestral blasts reflecting their respective roles in the unfolding lunacy.

### **Dr Pretorius and Sexual Politics**

Pretorius became the deviant centrepiece, even overshadowing the film’s two hand-made creatures and its title character. Thesiger, who had previously showed up in Whale’s superbly camp *The Old Dark House*, as pinch faced corrupted coward Horace Femm, was one of handful English players that the director would utilize in his distinctly British take on Hollywood fantasy. Pretorius, perhaps best described by David J Skal in his excellent book *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* as “...a gay Mephistopheles. Waspish and epicene...an over the top caricature of a bitchy and aging homosexual...” was in many ways (at least by the standards of 1935), the film’s most controversial element. Though in reality Thesiger was actually married to the same woman for fifty years, his performance in *Bride* becomes, arguably the embodiment of Whale’s own frustrations with ‘normal’ society. Though homosexual Whale was afforded some liberty not tolerated in other walks of life, being openly gay in Hollywood was still difficult and it is the sense of enforced repression that the director appears to be tearing apart most vehemently in this film particularly. Let us not forget, the story centres on two male characters who are hell bent on removing females from the creative process. The first time we see Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s wife, she is run out the room by an impatient Pretorius, eager to go about his ‘dark business’ with her bed ridden husband. This aside, there is no getting around the fact that Pretorius is a gloriously decadent creation, mad scientist meets black magician, an alchemical mix of malevolence, playful anarchy and seething cynicism stitched together in frock coated, screaming camp appeal.

Not only is Whale afforded the chance to flaunt his perceived ‘deviant’ nature by proxy in the form of Pretorius, *Bride* also becomes a chance for him to vent his spleen on other restrictive practices, particularly

religious ones. The often talked about mock crucifixion, depicting the much-maligned creature in Christ like pose is a clear indication of the director's dismissal of organised religion and its lazy attitudes, as is his shots of plundered Christian burial grounds and Pretorius's miniaturised Bishop, who, once coaxed from his complacent slumber, comically wags a judgemental finger at a randy Henry the Eighth.

### **The 'Bride'**

One of the key off-screen players, essential when it came to the production of Universal's run of classic monster movies, was of course make-up god Jack P Pierce. Not only had he painstakingly created the look for Lon Chaney Jr's Wolf-Man, he had also worked wonders on The Mummy and of course designed the most iconic face ever, that of Karloff's creature. When it came to unleashing Elsa Lanchester's undead zombie queen, Pierce's design was both simple and remarkably unforgettable, the look immediately entering the annals of pop-cultural history. Her image launching not so much a thousand ships as a million fancy dress shops. The creature's, pale, porcelain like face is both innocent and devil doll, her electrified demi-wave with its silver lightening streaks is terrifying and hilarious. Where Karloff was still clumping around in muck spreaders boots and stiff legged suit, Lanchester's costume consisted of being wrapped from neck to toe in shiny bandages topped in flowing white robe. Placed together the pair resembled a horribly twisted parody of the wedding ceremony – Karloff the brutish, clueless husband, Lanchester the unwilling wife.

Needless to say, things don't go well for the unhappy couple, when the monster's bride rejects the idea of marriage in an actual hissy fit, he decides to pull the plug on the whole affair, blowing apart himself, his bride, the castle and Pretorius in a less the acrimonious divorce.

It would be Whale's last and best horror film. As the legendary Dennis Gifford wrote in A Pictorial History of Horror, 'Bride of Frankenstein remains the biggest-budgeted, best dressed, highest polished, finest finished horror film in history; a first-class Hollywood product made with all the artistry and technology a top studio normally lavished upon its most commercial ventures.'