
KITCHEN SINK CREEPS

WEEK 1.

James Whale After *Frankenstein* (1931)

- After the huge success of *Frankenstein* (1931) British director James Whale, was understandably pressured somewhat into making a sequel.
- But despite Universal's hopes, a second Whale *Frankenstein* movie would remain unmade till 1935.

The Invisible Man Development

- Instead, Whale dodged the follow-up by agreeing to work on a proposed *The Invisible Man* adaptation. Universal, had bought the rights in 1931 after *Dracula* (1931) had proved such a box-office hit.
- At the time, Karloff had already been named as star, but Whale hesitated and wound up abandoning the project, fearing that he'd be forever seen as a 'horror' man.
- In his absence, the film went into what we might now describe as 'development hell'. Robert Florey, who Whale had earlier usurped on *Frankenstein*, was temporarily given the property.
- Under his watch, the idea would take on an outlandish, distinctly un-H.G. Wells feel, with much of the action involving invisible rats and a killer octopus, being based on another book Universal had the rights to, Peter Wylie's *The Murderer Invisible*.
- But with an over-cooked script and special-effects production problems, Universal lost patience and instead placed Karloff in the Whale-directed *The Old Dark House* (1932).
- Despite his earlier desire not to continue working in the horror genre, Whale had come back to it after his straight drama *The Impatient Maiden* (1932) had failed to set the world on fire.

The Old Dark House (1932)

- Directed by James Whale
- Produced by Carl Laemmle Jr
- Based on the novel *Benighted* by JB Priestley
- Written by RC Sheriff (*Journey's End*) and Ben Levy
- Cinematography by Arthur Edeson
- Edited by Clarence Kolster
- Music by David Broekman
- Based on the J.B. Priestley novel *Benighted*. *The Old Dark House* (1932), a flickering monochrome inter-war feature, examining the complexities of a crumbling system of class and aristocracy, was more social commentary than a straight-up monster movie, but it did provide an excellent performance from Ernest 'Have a Potato' Thesiger; and Karloff working an odd parody of his non-speaking spare-part creature.

The Old Dark House (1932) Cont...

- Pre-code film
- In some ways, it's the most James Whale of James Whale films
- It's camp
- Creepy
- Full of dark humour and very odd characters

- It follows an already established film trope – strangers arriving at an out of the way house to take shelter from a storm
- Centres around characters all mired in the past – just waiting for it all to come together in a physical and 'metaphysical' storm
- In some ways, it can be looked at as a microcosm of inter-war Britain

The House

- The house can be seen to represent the limitations of living on an isolated island like Britain – cut off and at the mercy of bad weather

The Occupants

- Can be seen to be a satirized version of British ruling class – replete with perverts, madman and religious zealots

Morgan

- Mute Morgan might be seen as representing the disenfranchised working class – brutal, alcoholic and ready to rebel

Pendril

- A war damaged cynic reflecting Whale's own experience

Horace

- Horace (Ernest Thesiger) seems to chime closely to Whale's own mischievous personality
- Even though he was only 53 Whale manages to make him look much older using low angle close ups

Whale presents us with a succession of polarities

- Deaf vs mute
- Free thinker vs religious zealot
- Home maker vs showgirl

- At 71 minutes, even for Universal at the time, it was a shorter run time
- The film fared well in the UK but was almost completely ignored in the states
- This may have been down to the film's unsettling 'end'

"Its happy ending – a panted on sunrise does nothing to dispel the shadows"

David Cairns

Horror in the UK

- Perhaps what's most perplexing about *Dead of Night*, is not just its odd nature or its quirky narrative style, but it is the fact that it seemed to come out of nowhere.
- Though scary movies were incredibly popular in the UK during the early part of the nineteen-thirties, particularly those pouring out of Hollywood, many British councils had complained to the BBFC (The British Board of Film Censors) about their content.
- Subsequently, films like Robert Mamoulian's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932) were still being shown but were often heavily cut, while Tod Browning's notoriously shocking *Freaks* (1932) was refused a certificate for thirty years.
- Censors clearly didn't know how to handle these newly created, audience-pleasing, yet highly controversial forms of entertainment.
- Under pressure from many local authorities, the BBFC was urged to introduce the infamous 'H' for Horror certificate.
- This was intended to preclude under sixteens from having access to these debauched and depraved cinematic spectacles.
- The result was that audiences for this kind of material were severely reduced, rendering the making of such genre-based entertainment unprofitable. This also had a knock-on effect with US imports.
- The dwindling British market led to an ease off of such productions, which wouldn't pick up again till the second wave of Universal monster movies came along in the nineteen forties.
- The only real 'horror' production to have come out of the UK, pre-World War Two was the Boris Karloff vehicle, *The Ghoul* (1936).

Ealing Films

- Often best remembered for the comedies – those movies were gloriously funny, deeply satirical and unquestionably British.
- And yet that same company that had developed these quintessentially sunny offerings also had a shadier side.
- During the Second World War, it had utilised several documentary filmmakers to produce grittier, more realistic material. Productions like Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* (1942) and Sergei Nolbandv's *Undercover* (1943) though undoubtedly propaganda tools, were deemed to offer a more accurate reflection of the international conflict.
- Later, the studio would also produce *The Cruel Sea* (1953), a piece which would at times propound an unflinching view of maritime battle-based tragedy.

Dead of Night (1945)

- But come nineteen forty-five, *Dead of Night*, would act as the grandparent to a new wave of UK based scares, giving rise to the likes of Hammer, Amicus and Tigon who specialised in home-grown terror.
- Was arguably the first 'true' British horror film
- Was the one of the first to employ the portmanteau format – later copied by Amicus
- Genuinely creepy
- Highly original
- A well-polished nightmare

Dead of Night (1945) Cont...

The film is divided into separate, yet interconnected stories

- Hearse Driver Sequence
 - Christmas Party Sequence
 - Haunted Mirror Sequence
 - The Golfer Story Sequence
 - The Ventriloquist's Dummy Sequence
- The linking narrative gives a cyclical 'nightmarish' quality to the presentation of the story

The Plot

- When arriving at a quaint rural cottage in the heart of the English countryside, the beautiful skies and rolling fields which surround aren't enough to dissuade architect Walter Craig (Mervyn Jones), that something ominously strange and unnervingly familiar is about to happen.
- There to see client, Eliot Foley (Roland Culvey) about a proposed building project, Craig is immediately drawn into some form of crippling *deja-vu*.
- His hosts and other visitors to the house become characters within a story which he claims he has experienced many times before in his dreams.

Production and Style

- This production, perhaps cautiously testing its toe in untried water, would be a very different beast to the kind of technicolour gothic that abounded in the more relaxed atmosphere of the fifties and sixties.
- While it is more forward-thinking and eccentric in its approach, to a greater degree it smacks of stiff upper lip, English reserve, teetering in the old world, still trying to cope with the devastation of the bombed cities which lay just beyond its villages and lush green pastures.
- Characters speak in clipped received English, their manner by today's standards impossibly dated, and yet it remains, a piercingly perverse bit of silver screen absurdity that cuts away the decades, somehow rendering it timeless and of its time.

Structure

- Architect Walter Craig is invited to the home of Elliot Foley to discuss renovations
- When he gets there, he is convinced he has seen the guests at the house before in a recurring dream
- Several guests relate their own stories which have supernatural overtones – these form the 'segments' of the narrative
- The whole film ends in a nightmare
- Walter wakes up in his bed but then the phone rings
- It's Elliot Foley inviting him over to the house...

Structure Cont...

- As we leave ‘The Ventriloquist’s Dummy’ we wind into the climax. When psychiatrist van Straaten breaks his spectacles, seemingly proving Craig’s predictions and outlandish claims about everything happening before, Craig lapses into a murderous psychosis choking the life out of the unfortunate doctor.
- Then in a fit of delirium Craig becomes briefly a part of all the stories we have just been witness to. Characters from the previous tales come sickeningly back to life in a whirling, surreal fever dream.
- Yet before we can properly make sense of it all, or any of it, Craig wakes up in his own bed.
- For a second we believe that this is just another example of the world’s oldest cop-out, but when the real conclusion comes, as Craig climbs into his car and heads back to the house he’s just dreamed about, it provides a real cold sweat moment.
- We are left staring into unending hell. The horror will never go away.
- And so, *Dead of Night* (1945) begins with a character believing he is reliving a dream and ends in a nightmare, a merry-go-round of fractured, fevered imagery, a concussion of repressed, Freudian terror.
- “If only I’d left here when I wanted to, when I still had a will of my own,” states the film’s beleaguered central protagonist, ‘You tried to stop me. You wouldn’t have done if you’d known...’.

“The film has haunted me since I first saw it just after my 12th birthday, and with each viewing something new is revealed in the stories... Though there is universal agreement that Michael Redgrave’s schizophrenic ventriloquist is the film’s most compelling invention, I now value each story, both for itself and for its contribution to the cumulative impact. The merging of dreaming and reality is what becomes truly terrifying.”

Phillip French

“Dead of Night is a remarkable and in some ways prophetic film... (it) is actively frightening in a way few British films have managed before or since.”

David Pirie