
THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

Week 2: Queer Fears

Male Homosexuality in the pre-Code era

The screen homosexual was called the nance, the poof, the fairy or the queer. He was the flouncing twit, the supporting character whose mere presence sparked a snicker. Associated with the upper ranks of the British class system and the backstage worlds of theatre and high fashion, the mincing gestures and perfumed wardrobe of the nance had been the staples of vaudeville sketches, legitimate theatre, and the silent screen in the 1920s"

Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood*

Homosexuality and the Horror Film

'In short, for many people in our shared English-Language culture, homosexuality is monstrous. Like an evil Mr. Hyde, or the Wolfman, a gay or lesbian-self inside of you might be striving to get out...'

Benshoff, H.M. (1997) p.1

Queer Cinema

'Sociologically, the term queer has been used to describe an "oxymoronic community of difference" which includes people who might also self-identify as gay and/or lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, drag queen, leather daddy, lipstick lesbian, pansy, fairy, dyke, butch, femme, feminist, asexual, and so on - any people not explicitly defining themselves in "traditional" heterosexual terms...Queer activism itself has been seen as unruly, defiant, and angry: like the mad scientists of horror films, queer proponents do want to restructure society by calling attention to and eventually dismantling the oppressive assumptions of heterocentrist discourse.'

Harry M Benshoff
Monsters in the Closet

...the queer, unlike the rather polite categories of gay and lesbian, revels in the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically proscribed position of the same-sex desire. Unlike petitions for civil rights, queer revels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny. Like Phantom of the Opera, the queer dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the dominant; frightening to look at, desiring, as it plays its own organ, producing its own music...'

Nancy Wride
"A Family United" *The Los Angeles Times*

James Whale

A gay working class Brit who had gone from theatre productions to Hollywood. Whale had a keen eye and a mischievous side. Often his films would be laced with 'Queer ideology'

'Homosexual parallels in Frankenstein (1931) and The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) arose from the vision both films had of the monster as an antisocial figure in the same way that gay people were "things" that should not have happened.'

Russo, V. (1981) p.49

'Jimmy Whale was the first guy who was blackballed because he refused to stay in the closet. [director] Mitchel Leisen and all those other guys played it straight, and they were onboard, but Whale said "fuck it, I'm a great director and I don't have to put up with this bullshit."'

Robert Altman

***The Old Dark House* (1932)**
James Whale

- 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

Ernest Thesiger (Horace Femm)

- Whale's close friend, Thesiger made his name in England as a female impersonator
- Known in London for his 'queer appeal'
- Used his 'pansy persona' for great effect in Whale's *The Old Dark House*

Context

- Kept out of circulation for years for varying official reasons it also showcases Whale's 'gay sensibility' most powerfully
- Though it follows the basic formula of a 'clutching hand' thriller – i.e. *The Cat and the Canary*, it ramps up its outrageousness by having the 'normals' be as eccentric as the 'queer' denizens of the house.

'Incest, necrophilia, male and female homosexuality, androgyny, sadomasochism, and orgiastic behaviour are all hinted at to greater or lesser degrees to characterize the denizens of the house as queer.'

Benshoff, H.M. (1997) p.43

'At the top of the dark and oppressive house lies its 102-year-old patriarch, Roderick Femm. Whale facilitates a queer reading of the film by having chosen actress Elspeth Dudgoen to enact the role, making manifest the gender-bending sexuality inherent in the family name.'

Benshoff, H.M. (1997) p.43

- 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 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 owners of the house can be seen to be a satirized version of British ruling class – replete with perverts, madman and religious zealots. Mute Morgan might be seen as representing the disenfranchised working class – brutal, alcoholic and ready to rebel

- Male lead Pendrill is a war damaged cynic reflecting Whale's own experiences
- 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'

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

- Neither actor though was treated with the respect they perhaps deserved
- 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

The Black Cat (1934)**Edgar G Ulmer**

- Directed by Edgar G Ulmer
- Produced by Carl Laemmle Jr and E M Asher
- Cinematography by John J. Mescall
- Edited by Ray Curtiss
- Music by Heinz Roemheld
- Screenplay by Peter Ruric

The look is like a zenith of Art Deco/Futurist set design. The film has a real Aliester Crowley influence. Karloff's look almost became a template for the 80s goth. Lugosi is at his most handsome and sympathetic. It's pretty strong stuff in terms of content – at least for the time, especially what's hinted at, if not shown.

- Kidnap
 - Torture
 - Rape
 - Satanic cults and rituals
 - Necrophilia
 - Skinning alive
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- A pre-code film
 - An almost continuous musical score
 - Shot in just 19 days
 - Cost less than \$96,000
 - Though pre-code, cuts were made and Lugosi's character was 'softened considerably'
 - Though the 'skinning scene' is shown in shadow only – this seems to make it worse – we imagine something stronger

"The Black Cat has been called the first psychological horror movie in America. Relentless in its over-the-top morbidity and almost bottomless in its resonating references to war, religion, film, theatre, architecture, psychiatry and classical music..."

David J Skal

It would be the first and last film Ulmer made for a major studio. He lived with personal demons. He also made enemies at Universal when he began an affair with Shirley who was married to a member of the Laemmle family

The Black Cat (1934) and Queer Readings

Presents a homoerotic triangle between Karloff and Lugosi and the Hetrosexualized couple. While practically all the 1930s horror films present sado-masochistic ideas or imagery, *The Raven* (1935) and especially *The Black Cat* (1934) add a homoerotic quality.

'...in both films, (The Raven and The Black Cat) the heroine is supposedly the object of villains' lusts, but any form of sexual consummation is displaced onto murder and torture – the heroine is to be sacrificed to the devil in The Black Cat and crushed to death with her lover in The Raven.'

Benshoff, H.M. (1997) p.61

Ostensibly, the identifiable melodrama is based around the heterosexual couple. However, what drives the core of the story is the sado-masochistic relationship between the two male 'monsters'

Dracula's Daughter (1936)

After *Dracula* (1931), Universal were understandably eager to produce a sequel. However, David O Selznick (MGM) had already acquired the rights to *Dracula's Guest* another story by the late Bram Stoker. Some have argued that the rights were shrewdly snapped up by Selznick with the explicit intention of selling them on to Universal. Universal bought the rights from Selznick, however, they would revert back to MGM if Universal had created a film by 1935, later moved back to 1936.

Though Laemmle thought he had secured Whale as director, Whale had other ideas. He was not keen to direct another horror picture, so he went off to direct *Show Boat*. Initially, Whale was replaced with A. Edward Sutherland, but when he left the studio, Lambert Hillyer stepped in.

Though a fairly run of the mill, though entertaining story in comparison to other Universal horrors, the central performance of Gloria Holden, with highly charged lesbian overtones, makes the film much more interesting from a cultural point of view.

'Gays as predatory, twilight creatures were a matter of style and personal interpretation in the horror films of the 1930s. The equation of horror with sins of the flesh is easily seen in monster movies of the period.'

Russo, V. (1981) p.48

'The essence of homosexuality as a predatory weakness permeates the depiction of gay characters in horror films.'

Russo, V. (1981) p.49

The depiction of Countess, while undoubtedly riddled with lesbian desire, also panders to changing attitudes. The horror film, by the late 30s and early 40s would begin to lose its bite.

According to Harry M Benshoff –

'While the film retains its classical status by linking homosexual desire to the usual Hollywood horror film signifiers of depravity (bestiality, necrophilia, sado-masochism, incest, racial Otherness, modernism, and the construction of the queer couple), it also looks ahead to a new set of signifiers which would become the chief foci of the monster movie's narrative during the war years – an increasing domesticization of the monstrous figures...'

Benshoff, H.M. (1997) p.77

In keeping with this sense of domesticization – the countess seeks to be cured of her 'condition'. This 'condition' *'...is expressed in terms of her queer sexuality, her non-traditional gender role, and death...'*