

## CHAPTER ONE

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### Defining horror

Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing, ask 'What is it in itself? What is its nature?' (Dr Hannibal 'the Cannibal' Lecter, *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991)

#### HOW DO YOU KNOW A HORROR FILM WHEN YOU SEE IT?

Defining what a horror film is should be easy. After all, 'horror film' is a widely used term. You will find it in film marketing: for example, a recent poster campaign for the American film *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) proclaimed it 'the best US horror movie in the last ten years' presumably on the confident basis that everyone looking at the poster would know what that meant. You will also find it in film reference books, listings magazines and as a section in most video rental outlets. As is the case for the other main film genres, including the western, the musical and the thriller, there is a familiarity about the designation 'horror film' and an accompanying assumption, both by the market and by critics, that audiences generally understand the term enough to organise their own viewing in relation to it, either – depending on their tastes – by actively seeking out horror films or by avoiding them like the plague.

Yet if one looks at the way that film critics and film historians have written about horror, a certain imprecision becomes apparent regarding how the genre is actually constituted. Not only do these critics and historians differ as to whether horror is a bad thing or a good thing, degrading or uplifting, mindless or thought provoking; they also sometimes differ as to which films should be thought of as horror films and which should not. This is particularly the case when attempts are made to separate out horror from the science fiction genre. For example, Stuart Kaminsky distinguishes horror from science fiction by arguing that 'horror films are overwhelmingly concerned

with the fear of death and the loss of identity in modern society' while by contrast 'the science fiction film deals with fear of life and the future, not fear of death' (Kaminsky, 1974, pp.101, 111). That he then ends up discussing as horror films a number of titles thought of by many other critics as science fiction – notably *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956) – simply demonstrates how indeterminate or ambiguous the generic identity of certain films can be.

Of course, it could be argued that these border disputes between genres are not in themselves especially numerous or significant, and that while there might be moments in film history where genres intersect – horror and science fiction in the 1950s, for example, or 1980s generic hybrids such as *Aliens* (1986) and *Predator* (1987) – the broader generic categories remain intact, i.e. most horror films are unequivocally horror rather than anything else. However, the more one thinks about the horror genre, the more one comes to realise how many films there are which appear to exist on generic borders and which can be classified in one direction or another. Consider, for example, the procession of films about serial killers that have appeared in American cinema since Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960. Slasher films like *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), 1990s slasher-revival films such as *Scream* (1996) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) as well as the likes of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Seven* (1995), *Copycat* (1995) and *Kiss the Girls* (1997), to name but a few, all boast thriller or whodunnit narrative structures with no obvious supernatural elements (although such elements do creep into some of the numerous sequels to *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*). In the past some of these, notably the slasher films, have more commonly been thought of as horror, while others, including *Seven* and *Copycat*, have tended to be seen as violent thrillers. But it is easy to envisage scenarios in which either the slasher films are drawn into a discussion of crime cinema or the more expensive, up-market psychological thrillers are seen as horror films (and indeed the fact that this chapter is headed by a quote from *The Silence of the Lambs* implies a claim for the film as a horror text).

A sense of the serial-killer film being only loosely anchored in a particular genre is underlined by the fact that in one major study of horror cinema, *The Philosophy of Horror* by Noel Carroll, films of this type are explicitly excluded from the discussion of the aesthetics of horror, while another major study of the genre, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* by Carol Clover, principally focuses on serial-killer/slasher films (Carroll, 1990; Clover, 1992). One could worry over the question of who is right out of these two scholars, but it is probably more profitable to consider how the definitions of horror they and other critics propose function as interventions into the horror genre rather than as disinterested meditations on the nature of horror. In other words, critics do not simply assume or rely upon a

pre-existing, well-established group of films when they write about horror but instead will often work to shape a group of films, including some and excluding others, in order to produce their own particular idea of what horror is.

This process of placement, whereby critics and historians position various films within or outside horror, is not only apparent for more recent types of film but also applies for earlier forms of horror cinema. For example, while most accounts of horror history published in the past thirty years refer to the German productions *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and *Nosferatu* (1922) as horror films, it is clear that these films were neither produced nor originally marketed as horror films but instead as 'art movies' (Elsaesser, 1989). Their designation as horror films is therefore retrospective, with Carlos Clarens' classic 1967 study of the genre, *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film*, perhaps the first sustained attempt to view them in such a way (Clarens, 1967). Much the same can be said of *King Kong* (1933). Now widely thought of as a 'horror classic', historians of 1930s US cinema have convincingly demonstrated that at the time of *King Kong*'s production and original release it was not thought of principally as a horror film but instead more as a jungle adventure movie. Along with other jungle adventure movies (such as the 1932 production *The Most Dangerous Game*), it only subsequently comes to be classified as a horror film (Berenstein, 1996; Erb, 1998). Even the 1931 version of *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi as the Count and seen by many as inaugurating the 1930s US horror boom, was originally marketed as a morbid romance, a thriller and a shocker but not as a horror film. In fact, the evidence suggests that the term 'horror film' itself did not become widespread until later on in the 1930s.

Matters are made yet more complicated by the fact that the film industry itself is not especially consistent in the way it defines and promotes horror cinema. Sometimes it will market particular films as horror in one context and then re-market them as belonging to another genre in a different context (and vice versa). One thinks here of the way in which Universal Studios sought to repackaging some of its classic horrors from the 1930s and 1940s – including *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Wolf Man* (1941) – as science fiction during the SF boom of the 1950s (Altman, 1999, pp.78–9). Ironically, later on in the 1950s those very same films would be packaged again as horror when they featured in the very popular horror film seasons screened on American television, while one of the 'classic' SF films from the 1950s, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, would be repackaged as horror in the late 1990s as part of the Universal Horror Video Collection.

What audiences make of this apparent generic fluidity is not always clear, but recent accounts of horror fandom suggest that, at the very least, the fan section of the horror audience does not passively accept industrial designations of the genre. For example, Mark Jancovich has noted the way

in which some horror fans saw *Scream* and its various sequels, all of which were sold as horror films, as 'inauthentic' horror rather than 'the real thing'. Jancovich cites one horror internet fan site in this regard:

*This new rash of movies masquerading as Horror flicks are driving classics off the shelves and good movies out of the theatres. Above all else, they are giving the genre a bad name. Do you want your kids to grow up thinking a Horror movie is only possible if Neve Campbell, Jennifer Love Hewitt or Sarah Michelle Geller stars in it? I don't think so.*

(Jancovich, 2000, p.30)

(For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with this sort of material, Neve Campbell and Jennifer Love Hewitt are the young stars of, respectively, the *Scream* trilogy and the *I Know What You Did Last Summer* films, while Sarah Michelle Geller – star of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – appeared in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Scream 2* and was killed off in both.)

Bearing all this in mind, the task of defining what a horror film is becomes rather more difficult than might originally have been supposed. In part, this has to do with the fact that the numerous definitions of horror cinema do not fit together into a cohesive whole. But it also has to do with the way in which a significant number of films are constantly being reclassified so far as their generic affiliations are concerned, with the industry, critics and sectors of the audience all working to construct their own versions of horror.

This difficulty in pinning horror down once and for all is actually part of a broader problem with defining genres. Given that film genres are marketing categories that audiences and film-makers need to know about and in some way understand in order for those genres to prosper, it is perhaps surprising that critical attempts to identify and delineate those properties that characterise particular genres are often so problematic. It is significant in this respect that when genre first became a major focus of interest in the study of film during the 1970s, it formed part of a more general turning away from what were perceived as the excesses of auteurism. Auteurism, looking at cinema in terms of directors, had been a controversial, cutting-edge development in film criticism during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in its insistence that artists of value and distinction were to be found working within the Hollywood studio system. But by the 1970s auteurism itself was increasingly perceived as old-fashioned and somewhat elitist in its outlook, with its focus on the uniquely talented individual film director often operating at the expense of an understanding of other aspects of cinema, notably cinema's existence as a medium of popular entertainment. Auteurism, which as Alan Lovell has

noted 'used the common critical tool of traditional artistic criticism (the author expressing the personal vision)', tended to put a distance between the way that auteurist critics saw film and the way that audiences saw them, with this being particularly the case for those mainstream entertainment films upon which so much auteurist activity had been concentrated (Lovell, 1975, p.5). Even when directors' names were used as part of a film's marketing – with examples including Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil B. DeMille or, more recently, Steven Spielberg or Ridley Scott – these seemed to operate more as 'brand names' than as promises of artistic or auteurist integrity.

Why do audiences go to see mainstream entertainment films? Not because of auteur-directors apparently but rather because of stars and genres, with these deployed within a particular narrative-based format. The study of genres was thereby legitimised as a way of thinking about cinema in terms of its popular appeal to audiences. Yet immediately genre criticism stumbled over the question of definition. *'Genre is what we collectively believe it to be'* stated Andrew Tudor confidently in a classic early piece of genre criticism, with that use of a 'we' that incorporated critics, audiences and film-makers an important assertion of how a genre-based approach to cinema would be different from an auteur-based one (Tudor, 1973, p.139). However, it quickly became apparent that it was not clear what we collectively believed, nor, for that matter, whether we collectively believed anything at all so far as genres were concerned. Defining the object – i.e. establishing what thing you will discuss before going on to discuss it – therefore became in the case of genre study not just a preliminary to genre analysis but itself a significant problematic that required considerable effort and sophistication to work through.

To a certain extent, matters were helped by the fact that much of this 1970s definitional work was organised around the western genre which, fortuitously, turned out to be one of the easiest mainstream genres to define (although even here there were problems). In searching for that 'Factor X' that bound together all the films belonging to a particular genre, one could point to the western's specific geographical and historical setting, to a fairly consistent set of visual conventions and devices, and, perhaps more contentiously, to a number of themes that, according to some critics, all westerns addressed, notably the conflict between civilisation and the wilderness. *In effect, critics sought to identify that which was distinctive visually about a genre – its iconography – and that which was distinctive in thematic or structural terms.* Problems arose when deciding which films to include and exclude. This was even the case with an 'obvious' genre like the western where numerous B movies that in various ways might have challenged the dominant critical definition of the western and its significance were not considered either because they were simply not available to critics or, in the case of the popular singing-cowboy films, because they were probably just too

embarrassing for those critics who wanted to stress the 'seriousness' of the western format.

A 'chicken and egg' type of problem is apparent here that is common to all genre definitions, namely deciding what comes first – the genre or the definition of the genre? How can one decide which films belong to a particular genre without a definition of that genre, and yet how can one form such a definition without knowing in the first place which films belong to that genre (Tudor, 1973, pp.135–8)? During the 1970s, when much of this genre theory was being formed, there did not seem to be an easy solution to this problem, and most critics ended up asserting their own definitions, with this leading to some partial accounts of genres (many of which have since been challenged by other critics). In retrospect, the most interesting feature of this problem is that it was only a problem for critics, not for the film-makers and audiences who seemed able to negotiate their way through various genres with ease, with this in turn suggesting that the basis of their knowledge of genre was in certain respects very different from that of genre critics and theorists.

If defining the western was not as straightforward as might have been supposed, it was as child's play compared to defining the horror film. Unlike the western, horror films have no distinctive iconography to bind them all together. They are not limited to any particular historical or geographical setting: a horror film can take place anywhere (any town, country, planet) in any historical period (past, present, future). So far as the genre's stylistic identity is concerned, while one can detect stylistic approaches that are popular and even dominant at certain moments in the genre's history – a visually expressionistic approach in the 1930s, for example, or a relatively realist approach in the 1970s – such approaches are not common across the genre as a whole.

In the face of such eclecticism, critics have often become preoccupied instead with what might be termed horror's inner workings, its themes and underlying structures as well as its social function, and have used this as a basis for genre definition. Here notions of repression and the monstrous have become very important. As Robin Wood, one of horror's most lucid critics, has put it, 'the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression' (Wood, 1986, p.75).

Other critics have taken issue both with Wood's politico-ideological readings of horror and with his reliance on some psychoanalytical terminology. However, there is a general agreement that horror films present us with fearful and unpleasant events and experiences but usually do this in a way that

renders those events and experiences pleasurable and/or 'safe'. Of course, this begs all sorts of questions. How is something as subjective as fearfulness defined in this context? By what process does fearfulness become entertainment? Is this feature of the genre its sole property, or can it be found in some non-horror films as well (and if so, what use is it to a basic definition of the horror genre)? Certainly if one wishes to see scary monsters *per se* as a defining feature of horror, one has to deal with the fact that other types of film – science fiction, fantasy, crime (if one thinks of the serial killer as a monster) – also have scary monsters in them, as well as the fact that not all films thought of as horror contain monsters. Or if, following Wood's lead, horror films are about repression, one also has to take into account that repression can be seen as an important element in various westerns, melodramas, thrillers and musicals.

Most critical accounts of horror engage with some or all of these issues, and out of this emerges, as noted above, numerous definitions and delineations of the horror genre as different critics adopt their own particular stances. It seems from this that the prospect of coming up with a model of horror cinema that would enable us to identify definitively which films are horror and which films are not remains as distant as ever.

Recent developments in genre theory have suggested ways around this problem. In particular, 1970s genre theory's concern with defining genres has itself come to be seen as problematic inasmuch as it presupposes that there is a cohesive body of films pre-existing the critical work of definition which only needs to be discovered and described by the observant critic. It has already been noted in this chapter that in fact industrial and fan-based definitions of horror are far from cohesive or consistent, and that, for the market at least, horror – and, for that matter, other genres as well – exists as a provisional grouping of films subject to significant alteration as the requirements of the market change. One might also argue that, so far as it can be ascertained and measured, the audience's understanding of horror is similarly fragmented, pragmatic and short-term. In other words, neither the industry nor audiences think about the horror genre as either a historical or a theoretical totality; instead they operate on a much smaller scale, interested only in what is relevant to them in the context within which their engagement with horror is situated.

It seems from this that those critical attempts to define horror in totalising terms, to come up with a definition that exceeds localised uses of the term, often operate on an abstract level, constructing what in effect is an ideal of horror that is seen to lurk behind a whole range of horror films. This approach results in accounts that stand at some distance from industrial and audiences' perceptions in a manner comparable with those auteurist approaches against which genre theory itself can be seen as a kind of reaction. Different accounts

of the horror genre therefore offer competing accounts of what the horror-ideal might be. Genre theorist Rick Altman describes this situation well in his book *Film/Genre*.

*Genres are not inert categories shared by all (although at some moments they certainly seem to be), but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations. Even when the details of the discourse situation remain hidden, and thus the purpose veiled, we nevertheless do well to assume that generic references play a part in an overall discursive strategy.*

(Altman, 1999, p.101)

It does not follow that all these definitions of horror carry the same weight, however. Some have clearly gained widespread support. For example, it would be hard today to find anyone – an audience member, a critic or a filmmaker – who would not accept that *Dracula* films are horror films (although, as we have seen, the 1931 *Dracula* was initially marketed as a weird thriller rather than as a horror film). In fact, one has to wonder whether Universal's attempt in the early 1950s to sell *Dracula* as science fiction was likely to win the assent of audiences who had grown accustomed to thinking of the film as horror. But this consensual position on *Dracula* has only been achieved through the suppression or marginalisation of ways of thinking about *Dracula* – both the original 1931 production and its literary and theatrical sources – in relation to other generic groupings. Nor is it unimaginable that future readings of *Dracula* films may relate them, or some of them, in relation to other genres, genres that might not yet be in existence. Saying that *Dracula* films are horror films is not the same, therefore, as saying that they are essentially and irrevocably horror films. Rather it is an indication that these films are widely perceived as horror within particular contexts.

This section began by asking the question 'How do you know a horror film when you see it?' By now the answer should be a little clearer. The ways in which you recognise any film as horror is dependent upon the context within which you see the film. Someone in the 1930s is likely to have a very different notion of how horror is constituted from someone in the 1970s (and not everyone in either the 1930s or the 1970s is likely to agree on what films are horror). Moments of consensus do appear – moments when there is a convergence of industrial and critical designations of horror – but these moments are themselves subject to historical change.

What this means is that a definition of horror cinema cannot simply be achieved by reeling off a list of films. The horror genre is much more amorphous and unpredictable than this, and in order to understand this amorphousness and unpredictability, one needs to explore how shifting

understandings of horror – industrial, critical and, where the evidence is available, audience-based understandings – are themselves an integral part of generic definition and generic history.

At the same time, one has to be aware that any new account of horror – such as that provided by this book – necessarily represents an intervention into this process of definition. At certain points I will no doubt refer to particular films as horror that some readers might not accept as part of the genre (*The Silence of the Lambs*, for example). Given that there can be no fixed, once-and-for-all list of horror films, this is unavoidable. Such an approach might well prove an affront to those who consider that studying an object involves keeping a distance from that object and thereby protecting one's own objectivity. In the face of this, I would argue that such 'objectivity' is an illusion, a denial that one is always operating from a particular, limited perspective. In the case of horror, writing about the genre involves to a certain extent becoming part of the genre, contributing towards the process of generic development in its broadest sense, and in some small, modest way having an effect not only on what horror is but also on what horror might be. Perhaps the most striking and exciting feature of horror cinema in this respect is that, like one of its own shape-shifting monsters, it is always changing, always in process. At the very least, I hope that this book can give a sense both of the imaginative energies involved in this process and of all those moments in film history when something called horror has left its mark.

### **WHERE DID THE HORROR FILM COME FROM?**

One way of thinking about the identity of horror cinema is to consider its origins. Where did the horror film begin? In historical terms, the answer to the question is clear. Horror cinema began in the early 1930s in the American film industry. In other words, the early 1930s marked the point where the term 'horror' became understood – by the industry, by critics, by audiences – as designating a particular type (or, as we shall see, types) of film, with the recognition of this term apparent not just in America but in other countries where American films were distributed. For example, in 1933 the British film censors actually came up with a new classification, the H certificate, specifically for this new category of film.

It follows from this that when critics designate films made before the early 1930s as horror films, they are doing so retrospectively. As already noted, while German films *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *Nosferatu*, along with *The Student of Prague* (1913) and *The Golem* (1913), might well anticipate and be an influence upon later horror production, they were not deemed to be horror films when they first appeared. Much the same can be said for a small number

of films produced within the American film industry before 1930, films which to our eyes look like horror films and which are often classified as such in discussions of horror cinema but which were categorised differently at the time of their original release. These include two early versions of *Frankenstein*, the first produced in 1910, the second – under the title *Life Without a Soul* – in 1916, as well as *The Werewolf* in 1913 and two versions of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in 1920 (one of which starred John Barrymore as the troubled doctor). To this list can be added several Lon Chaney films from the 1920s, notably *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1923 and *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1925. The presence of such films in the pre-1930s period showed that when horror cinema did emerge, it did not come from thin air, so to speak, but instead often drew upon and reworked elements already present within cinema.

Many critics have also seen gothic literature as providing another important source for the horror film. However, establishing the precise nature of the connection between gothic and horror is complicated by the fact that the term 'gothic' itself can be just as vague and imprecise as the term 'horror'. Used as a historical term, gothic refers not just to a period of literary history but also to a period of architectural history (and, more recently, has been applied to a youth subculture as well as to a brand of romantic fiction). So far as literature is concerned, the original gothic period ran from about 1760 through to about 1820. The English and Irish novels deemed by literary historians to be part of what was a kind of literary cycle or movement included Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Although this work is very diverse, literary historian David Punter has identified some of the elements underpinning it: 'an emphasis on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense' (Punter, 1996, p.1).

But 'gothic' has also been used in a broader sense to designate an approach apparent in both European and American literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of particular interest here so far as the later development of both horror and science fiction cinema is concerned is a cluster of novels published in Britain in the late-Victorian period which are sometimes referred to as 'decadent gothic'. These included Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), all of which have been repeatedly adapted for cinema.

The relationship between gothic and horror is not always clear. In some instances, the terms are used as if they are interchangeable, while in other

circumstances 'gothic horror film' denotes a type of horror cinema reliant on period settings (Hammer horror, for example). The more common approach is to see gothic literature as a precursor to and influence upon horror cinema. However, it is worth noting that very few gothic novels have actually been adapted for the cinema, with this particularly applying to the initial outpouring of gothic literature in the 1760–1820 years. Of these, only *Frankenstein* and *The Monk* have been filmed (and the 1972 production of *The Monk* – scripted by Luis Bunuel and directed by Ado Kyrou – played down the original novel's horror-like elements). Inasmuch as they display an interest in gothic literary texts at all, horror film-makers have tended to focus, with the notable exception of *Frankenstein*, on the late-Victorian gothic novels, works which in many respects are very different from the original gothics. The other significant fact about the cinematic adaptations of gothic novels that do exist is that none of them is even remotely faithful to the literary originals, with this applying to all film versions of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* from the 1930s onwards.

Given that horror production in the genre's initial formative phase during the 1930s was based almost entirely in the United States, it is striking that the work of American gothic writers such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne did not feature at all in 1930s American horror films. Only the writings of Edgar Allan Poe were used, albeit in a 1932 film version of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* that arguably owed more to *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* than it did to Poe's original story. (*The Black Cat*, from 1934, and *The Raven*, from 1935, took their titles from Poe but very little else.) So why did those American film-makers who turned to gothic literature for their sources turn to British gothic rather than the American version?

Answering this involves thinking about what happened to certain gothic novels in the period in-between their publication and their entrance into horror cinema, namely that they – and notably *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – were adapted for the stage. In fact, an explanation for many of the differences between the 1930s film versions of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and the literary originals is that the films drew upon theatrical adaptations which had already taken considerable liberties with what were often sprawling literary narratives in order to make them work on stage. The popularity of stage versions of certain gothic novels highlights a quality of gothic that was important to the development of horror cinema but which is sometimes overlooked in critical accounts of gothic – its commercial value. This was especially the case with *Dracula*. Published in 1897 by Bram Stoker, himself someone who worked in the commercial theatre, it was adapted for the British stage by Hamilton Deane in 1924 and subsequently revised for the American stage by John L. Balderston in 1927, with this transatlantic version providing the basis for the famous Universal



1930s horror icon: Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula in *Dracula* (1931). Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP.

film that starred Bela Lugosi as the Count (for details, see Skal, 1990). The attractiveness of the *Dracula* story to Universal clearly had more to do with its status as a recent commercial success within the American market than with its status as a British gothic text. In other words, if there had happened to have been, say, a successful stage version of American novelist Charles Brockden Brown's gothic masterpiece *Wieland* playing on Broadway in the late 1920s

(which there wasn't), we might well have had a film adaptation of that in addition to, or instead of, the version of *Dracula* that appeared in 1931, and the subsequent development of the horror film could have been quite different.

Two more theatrical events that arguably were of significance in the development of the American horror film were the productions on Broadway of *The Bat*, by Avery Hopwood and Mary Roberts Rinehart, in 1920 (based on Rinehart's classic American crime novel of 1908, *The Circular Staircase*) and *The Cat and the Canary*, by John Willard, in 1922. Both were crime thrillers – the Bat in the Rinehart play was not a vampire but instead a master crook – that took place largely in dark, possibly haunted houses, with all sorts of bizarre events going on in the shadows. As one might expect from crime thrillers, everything is explained in the end and the criminals revealed and caught, but for a while these narratives toy with the idea of the supernatural.

The substantial and long-lasting box-office success of *The Bat* and *The Cat and the Canary* led to further plays of a similar ilk, and Hollywood adapted a number of these while also coming up with its own original versions of what has come to be known as the haunted house spoof. *The Bat* was filmed in 1926 and, as *The Bat Whispers*, in 1930 (with another version coming along in 1959). The first film adaptation of *The Cat and the Canary*, stylishly directed by German émigré Paul Leni, appeared in 1927, and two more versions were released in 1930, *The Cat Creeps* and *La voluntad del muerto*, the latter of which was a Spanish-language version shot on the same sets as *The Cat Creeps* but with a different cast and crew. (Universal, the studio that produced *The Cat Creeps*, produced a Spanish-language version of the 1931 Lugosi *Dracula* in similar circumstances. Some critics, notably David Skal, have suggested that this version of *Dracula* is better than the English-language one; see Skal, 1990, pp.153–78.) A fourth version, this time reverting to the title *The Cat and the Canary* and starring Bob Hope in his first major film role, was produced in 1939; and in 1978, a fifth rendition of the tale made a somewhat belated appearance. Other films of this type from the 1920s included D.W. Griffith's *One Exciting Night* (1922), *The Last Moment* (1923), *The Monster* (1925), *Unknown Treasures* (1926), *The Gorilla* (1927), *The Terror* (1928) and Paul Leni's haunted theatre drama *The Last Warning* (1929).

It is interesting to compare theatrical adaptations of gothic novels with these haunted house spoofs in terms both of setting and of tone. If we take as an example of the former the John Balderston stage version of *Dracula*, we find, perhaps surprisingly given that we now tend to associate *Dracula* films with period costumes, that it is set in the 1920s and that, unlike Bram Stoker's novel, the play takes place entirely in England. (The novel's Transylvanian scenes had been cut for reasons of economy but would be reinstated in the 1931 Universal film production.) The tone throughout, as it would be for all

versions of *Dracula* until Hammer's 1958 rendition of the story, is relentlessly humourless, and the non-American foreignness both of Dracula and his world is stressed as much as possible. By contrast, the haunted house spoof tends to be set firmly within contemporary America, with not only American heroes and heroines but also American villains. It also usually boasts comedic elements, with the extreme and potentially supernatural and horrific events of the narrative not meant to be taken too seriously.

Historians of the horror film have often argued that monsters in 1930s US horror cinema are, in the main, non-American, with their activities usually taking place on foreign shores safely distant from America. From this perspective, horror itself becomes a kind of foreign intrusion into American cinema, with some of its non-American sources including British gothic literature and German Expressionist cinema. Underlining this is the fact that the two main stars of 1930s US horror, Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, were, respectively, Hungarian and English, and a number of important horror filmmakers from this period were also not American – for example, the English film director James Whale who was responsible for *Frankenstein* in 1931 and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), among others, and the German cinematographer and director Karl Freund who photographed the Lugosi *Dracula* and directed *The Mummy* (1932) and *Mad Love* (1935).

However, such an understanding of 1930s horror tends to be based on one specific type of horror from the period, the horror films produced by Universal Studios (including *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy*). If one looks at horror films produced by other studios, one can quite easily find narratives set in contemporary America. The significance of the 1920s haunted house spoof in this respect is that it demonstrates that in the years leading up to the formation of the horror film there were numerous examples within American popular culture of fictions involving fear, madness and horror located in recognisable contemporary American landscapes. It follows that while in certain circumstances, the gothic circumstances of Dracula and Frankenstein, the monster might well be foreign, elsewhere monsters sometimes turned out to be much closer to the American home.

In other respects, and despite its modernity, the haunted house spoof can reasonably be seen as belonging, if distantly, to the gothic. As Punter notes, "'Gothic' fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves' (Punter, 1996, p.1). While there might not be any castles in the haunted house spoof, there are cavernous, castle-like houses along with terrorised heroines, unspeakable terrors, sinister villains, and the threat – if not the actuality – of ghosts and supernatural monsters. In fact this type of fiction can be related to the 'supernatural-explained' mode of gothic fiction associated with novelist Ann Radcliffe, whose work often contained

apparently supernatural happenings that ultimately turned out to be part of a criminal conspiracy.

As noted above, there are very few film adaptations of gothic novels in the 1930s (or thereafter, for that matter). Similarly, there are not that many haunted house spoofs in the same period. Yet the influence of gothic literature can arguably be traced in certain films in terms of their settings and some of their themes, while the influence of the haunted house spoof is also readily apparent, usually (but not exclusively) in films that have contemporary settings, including *Doctor X* (1932), *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *Mark of the Vampire* (1935, a remake of the Lon Chaney film of 1927, *London After Midnight*), to name but a few. Importantly, however, the popular entertainment market mediates this kind of influence. There is no evidence that the makers of either the 1931 *Dracula* or the 1931 *Frankenstein* had much respect for or interest in the gothic literary originals, nor that the creators of the haunted house spoof had read, or even knew about, Ann Radcliffe's work. Instead they were all drawing upon and reworking material that had a proven contemporary commercial life either in theatre or in cinema itself.

Any account of horror that sees it as emerging from gothic literature, or as itself an expression of a gothic mode that underpins a range of cultural texts from the eighteenth century to the present, inevitably ends up marginalising the economic forces at work in the creation of horror cinema. One can understand why certain critics shy away from the commercial realities of the horror film. Given that horror has frequently been criticised for being exploitative, those critics concerned to defend it often seek to raise its status through associating it with areas of 'serious' culture (albeit areas of culture such as gothic literature that when they first appeared were themselves sometimes accused of being exploitative). The term 'horror' itself can become somewhat embarrassing and vulgar in this respect, doubly vulgar in fact because not only is it a marketing term but it also describes a crude bodily sensation that stands at some distance from the 'higher' feelings that culture is meant to instill in us. Yet the reality of horror cinema, both in its initial formation and in its subsequent development, is above all else a vulgar commercial reality, and any account of horror cinema needs to engage with the brute forces of the market.

## SEQUELS AND CYCLES IN 1930S US HORROR

Understanding commercial film production necessarily involves having to come to terms with the film sequel and the film cycle. While, as we have seen, definitions of genre often operate on a level of generality that can obscure localised deployments of generic terms, sequels and cycles of films usually

have a historical specificity to them. They exist in relation to particular times and particular places, and they offer an intermediate stage between the uniqueness of individual films and the formulaic nature of generic production. Genre theorist Rick Altman has argued that cycles of films function as proprietary brand names which are owned, developed and exploited by particular companies – for example, the series of movies at MGM during the 1930s and 1940s featuring Andy Hardy, or the detective films featuring 'The Falcon' at RKO in the 1940s. In this, they are quite different from film genres which are not owned by anyone. It follows that it makes more sense in economic terms for a production company to develop its own profitable film cycles than it does for it to make more general all-purpose genre films (although, as Altman notes, smaller companies with no valuable properties of their own often have little choice but to 'borrow' elements from other successful films for their own – usually low-budget – productions in a manner that hopefully does not leave them open to prosecution for breach of copyright: Altman, 1999, pp.113–21).

Like all film genres, horror can be seen as proceeding via successive waves of sequels and cycles as initial commercial hits are exploited by the company fortunate to own the films in question, while other companies seek to find their own way to cash in on that success. One might go further and argue that, so far as an understanding of genre history is concerned, the follow-up films are more important than the films that spawned them inasmuch as they reveal patterns of generic development not immediately apparent from just looking at the initial work. Bearing this in mind, it is worth considering the role of cycles and sequels in the 1930s, the inaugural decade of film horror.

As noted by most historians of horror cinema, the main producer of horror films in this period was Universal Studios. One of the smaller of the eight companies that dominated the American film industry, Universal had experienced some commercial success during the 1920s with macabre work such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), although its transition into a 'horror factory' was not a smooth one, with Carl Laemmle, the head of the company, disliking the new horror films produced by his son, Carl Laemmle Junior. Nevertheless, it was Universal that inaugurated the 1930s horror boom with the release in 1931 of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, and the same studio was also responsible for the introduction into sound cinema of the mummy in *The Mummy* and the werewolf in *The Werewolf of London* (1935). All four of these represented potential 'brand-name' products or, to use a more modern term, 'franchises', properties that could generate profits across a range of films, and certainly in later years Universal was prepared to defend its 'ownership' of these properties in the courts, notably throughout the 1960s and 1970s when it engaged in a legal battle with the family of Bela Lugosi over who owned

rights to images of Lugosi as Dracula. (Universal eventually won the case; for an interesting discussion of some of the legal ramifications, see Gaines, 1992, pp.175–207.)

By contemporary standards, however, Universal was slow off the mark in producing sequels to these four films. Nowadays if a film, and especially a horror film, is commercially successful, one can expect to see a sequel in 1–2 years – perhaps a little longer if it was a big-budget film. By contrast, the first Frankenstein sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein*, appeared in 1935, four years after the original, and the second, *Son of Frankenstein*, in 1939, while *Dracula's Daughter* (in which Dracula only appears as a briefly glimpsed corpse) came out in 1936, five years after *Dracula*, and Dracula himself would not be seen in a Universal film until the 1940s. Horror fans would have to wait even longer for another mummy or werewolf film, with *The Mummy's Hand* appearing in 1940 and *The Wolf Man* in 1941, and in any event both of these proved to be re-workings of the mummy and werewolf stories rather than sequels to the 1930s films (although they themselves subsequently generated several sequels).

This tardiness can in large part be assigned to the absence in the 1930s of what might be termed an established 'sequel culture'. Serials – weekly twenty-minute episodes usually with a cliffhanger ending setting up the next episode – were a popular part of the cinema-going experience, and there were also series of feature films structured around particular characters – the aforementioned Andy Hardy films, for example, or numerous Charlie Chan and Mr Moto detective films. But the idea of making a film that in some way followed on chronologically from a previous film, as opposed to a film that simply featured a returning character, was a novel one. Matters were complicated further for Universal when it quickly became apparent from the critical and public response to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* that the figures of fascination, the potential brand names, were not Frankenstein or Van Helsing, Dracula's nemesis, but rather the monsters themselves. Unfortunately Universal had killed off both these monsters at the end of the films in which they appeared (and had also killed off the mummy and the werewolf for good measure).

A well-established convention in the various sources, gothic and otherwise, from which the new horror cinema drew, was that the monster had to be destroyed in the course of the narrative. The problem confronting Universal, therefore, was how to bring back a profitable monster, and the solutions it devised to this problem have informed horror film production ever since. One approach, the *Dracula's Daughter* approach, is not to bring the monster back at all but instead to replace him with another monster, in the case of *Dracula's Daughter* a female vampire. The *Scream* films from the 1990s adopted a similar method by keeping the killer's distinctive mask from one film to the next but having different killers behind it for each film. The other, more

influential approach is to bring back the 'destroyed' monster, either by retrospectively finding a loophole in the plot of the original film that enables the film-makers to claim that the monster did not die really, or by actually resurrecting the dead monster. *Bride of Frankenstein* exemplifies this approach. In this film, it turns out that the monster was not destroyed by the fire that apparently consumed him at the end of the original 1931 *Frankenstein* but is merely waiting in the ruins of the old mill for the next film to begin. The 'resurrection' option would not figure much in 1930s cinema, but it would be important in Universal's 1940s horror films where Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the mummy and the wolf man would all repeatedly be brought back from the dead.

It follows that one of the things Universal was attempting to work out during the 1930s was what a horror sequel was. This involved finding a way of resolving the apparent contradiction between the narrative imperative that dictated the monster must die (not until the 1960s would it become acceptable for a horror monster to be left alive at the end of a film) and the commercial imperative dictating that the monster must survive. The fact that there were no obvious precedents for this kind of operation goes some way to explaining the awkwardness of the opening sequence of *Bride of Frankenstein*, with Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron wheeled on to explain how the narrative of *Bride of Frankenstein* connects with the 1931 *Frankenstein* film. By contrast, *Son of Frankenstein* handles itself as a sequel far more confidently, and by having the new Baron assert that the monster is indestructible, this third Universal *Frankenstein* film usefully justifies the monster's future appearances in all the sequels to come.

Historians of the horror film have sometimes made a great deal of the fact that a number of post-1960s horror films have 'open' endings in which the monster is not defeated, with this narrative 'openness' itself seen as expressing an ambivalence about, or even a critique of, dominant social values. Whether or not this is the case (and it will be discussed later in this book), it is certainly true that a number of Universal horror films from the 1930s and 1940s also depended upon a kind of narrative openness, albeit one with a commercial function. While, say, Frankenstein's monster is destroyed in *Son of Frankenstein* and the mummy is destroyed at the end of *The Mummy's Hand*, audiences and film-makers by this stage confidently expected these creatures to return, and hence the endings themselves became in effect pro-forma events not to be taken as too final.

The 'sequelisation' of horror initiated by Universal during the 1930s accelerated in the 1940s, with Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the wolf man and the mummy appearing regularly alongside each other in multi-monster narratives such as *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945) and, ultimately, *Abbott and*

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The horror sequel: Elsa Lanchester as the female monster in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP.

*Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Critics have often seen this 1940s work as entailing a falling away in terms of quality from the 1930s films. Budgets and production values were generally lower in the 1940s than they had been in the 1930s, and an increasing reliance on sequels – with virtually every 1940s Universal horror film a sequel of some kind or other – apparently denoted a more openly exploitative approach to the horror genre than before. Because of this, it has become common in histories of horror for 1930s Universal horror to be considered as a separate entity from 1940s Universal horror, with the former deemed more original, innovative and imaginative.

This negative perception of sequel-heavy 1940s Universal horror is often intertwined with a prejudice against the sequel itself as a particular cinematic format, with the sequelisation process seeming to mark the moment where innovation ends and exploitation begins. Given the importance of sequels and cycles of films in the subsequent development of the horror genre, it is worth pointing out here that the original 1930s Universal horrors – along with later ‘original’ horror films that spawned sequels – were just as much creatures of the market as the sequels that followed and were just as much exploiting previously existing material (in the form of stage adaptations, etc.). Equally, sequels themselves afforded all sorts of opportunities for filmmakers to innovate and engage imaginatively with the material, with this happening more often in 1940s Universal horror than has sometimes been acknowledged.

If one defines a horror cycle as a series of films featuring a particular character (usually a monster), then there is really only one such cycle in 1930s horror, the *Frankenstein* cycle, with the 1931 *Frankenstein* followed by *Bride of Frankenstein* in 1935 and *Son of Frankenstein* in 1939. (As already noted, *Dracula* only generates one sequel in which the Count himself does not appear.) However, the term ‘film cycle’ has also been used by historians of cinema to designate a group of films emanating from a particular studio, films which are seen as sharing certain stylistic or thematic features – for example, the horror films produced by Val Lewton at RKO during the 1940s, or the horror films produced in Britain by the Hammer company from the late 1950s through to the early 1970s. From this perspective, all of Universal’s horror films from the 1930s might be seen together as comprising a Universal horror cycle, although this presupposes, of course, that they share a common identity.

A survey of the films themselves reveals that virtually all of them – with the exception of *The Raven* – are set away from America but that the majority also have contemporary settings. (1940s Universal horror would be more open to the idea of bringing the monster to America, in *Son of Dracula*, the *Mummy* series and, not least, in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*.) Many historians of the horror film have claimed that the monster in 1930s US horror is

invariably foreign. Robin Wood has pointed out some of the implications of this: 'the foreignness of horror in the 1930s can be interpreted in two ways: simply, as a means of disavowal (horror exists, but is un-American), and, more interestingly and unconsciously, as a means of locating horror as a "country of the mind", as a psychological state' (Wood, 1986, p.85). Similarly, Andrew Tudor has argued that 1930s horror is set in an 'elsewhen', a space apart from an everyday American reality (Tudor, 1989, p.123). This quality is often linked to the fact that these horror films were being produced during the Great Depression, with the implication being that the films offered an escape into an unreal world away from the depredations of a grim economic reality.

Regardless of the relation of horror to the Depression (an issue to which we will return shortly), it is clear that this understanding of horror is based primarily on the Universal horror film. It is also clear that it entails an 'averaging-out' process by which differences between films are elided in order that a cohesive identity might be assigned to a particular group of films, in this case the Universal horrors. However, if one looks at the films themselves, some very striking differences can quite easily be found. For example, director James Whale's British-set films *The Old Dark House* and *The Invisible Man* (1933), with their predominantly British casts and their eccentric sense of humour, have a distinctive character of their own; and one wonders whether in fact they would have been classified as horror films at all if they had not been directed by the man who made *Frankenstein*. Similarly, the playful use of expressionistic devices apparent in Whale's horror work generally should not be lumped together with the more ponderous expressionistic style of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* or *Son of Frankenstein*. If one considers setting alone, one finds that the feudal European settings of the *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* films have little in common with the starkly modernist European landscape conjured up by Edgar Ulmer's *The Black Cat*, and while *The Mummy* might 'borrow' some of its narrative from *Dracula*, its Egyptian setting and its attitude to things foreign is quite distinct from its vampiric predecessor.

It seems from this that while the majority of 1930s Universal horror films deployed notions of the 'foreign', no uniform treatment of foreignness was apparent. Nor was there uniformity in terms of style or tone. So far as the latter was concerned, some of the films, notably those directed by James Whale as well as *The Black Cat*, had their tongues placed firmly in their respective cheeks while others exhibited none of this or any other kind of humour.

1930s Universal horror emerges from this as a heterogeneous grouping of films that are connected only in a loose, fairly general way. This does not mean that Universal horror was not perceived as a distinctive entity at the time, for clearly it was. But the nature of that entity had more to do with its status as a particular brand name than it did with the inherent qualities of the films themselves. Universal became associated with horror, as would

Hammer films in the 1950s and 1960s, because it made more successful horror films over a longer period of time than did any of its competitors. In doing this, it helped to develop some of the key horror stars – Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi – and other horror specialists (directors, cinematographers, screenwriters) who would subsequently go on to do notable work not just for Universal but for other studios as well. Someone going to see a Universal horror film in the 1930s is likely to have expected a non-American setting, particular stars (Karloff, Lugosi, etc.) and a narrative involving particular types of monster (including vampires, werewolves, mad scientists, etc.), just as decades later audiences for Hammer horror would have anticipated period settings, stars such as Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, and particular monsters. But these very general expectations, and the brand name with which they are associated, should not be confused with or used to define the films themselves, which are often more distinct from each other than the brand name suggests.

This sense that 1930s horror in general was rather more varied than sometimes supposed is yet more apparent if one looks at the films produced by companies other than Universal, in particular a cluster of films that appeared in the early 1930s. Notable among these were Paramount's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931) and *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), Warner Brothers' *Doctor X* and *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933) and MGM's *Freaks* (1932). Of these, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was clearly a 'quality' production, boasting a prestigious director in Rouben Mamoulian and high production values as well as an already-established star in Fredric March (whose performance in the film won him an Oscar). By contrast, *Island of Lost Souls*, with its story of a mad scientist's horrifying experiments, seems a much more opportunistic attempt to cash in on Universal's success. Based on H.G. Wells' novel *The Island of Dr Moreau*, the film explored the sexual tensions involved in a scenario where men take control of the reproductive process in a far more perverse manner than did the 1931 *Frankenstein* (although Universal's *Bride of Frankenstein*, now often seen as a camp or gay film, would go even further in this respect). It also managed to convey the sadistic cruelty of its scientist's surgical activities so effectively that the British censors banned it until 1958 (and it did not receive a public screening in Britain until 1967).

It is clear that the figure of the mad scientist was an important one in many US horror films of the 1930s and 1940s. However, just as one does not find absolute consistency in Universal horror's treatment of foreignness, one should not expect the mad scientist always to be presented in the same way by US horror films in general. Having said this, *Frankenstein* and Doctor Moreau in *Island of Lost Souls* have more than a little in common: both are foreign (played by English actors Colin Clive and Charles Laughton respectively) and both aspire to control life itself. Accordingly, each of these characters

compares himself with God (although Frankenstein's dialogue to this effect was cut from the 1931 film *Frankenstein* in the mid-1930s, for reasons of 'decency'). By contrast, the portrayal of science and the scientist in Warner Brothers' *Doctor X* takes us in another direction.

*Doctor X* is a whodunnit set in contemporary America. Its narrative deals with the attempt to track down the Moon Killer, a serial murderer who strangles and mutilates his victims. The main suspects are scientists working at Doctor Xavier's Research Institute, all of whom, with their eccentricities and arrogance, potentially fit the description of 'mad scientist'. Ultimately, in true whodunnit fashion, the murderer turns out to be the least likely suspect, an American scientist apparently incapable of strangling anyone because he only has one arm. It is revealed that the scientist in question has developed 'synthetic flesh' with which he can replace his missing limb, strangle his victims and then remove the body parts he needs to continue his experiments. Unlike Frankenstein and Doctor Moreau – whose aims are massively anti-social and who accordingly live apart from society – the scientist's motive in *Doctor X* is in itself a reasonable one. He wants to help the physically handicapped: 'I'll make a crippled world whole again,' he explains as he prepares to kill his next victim. Here the insanity lies instead in the scientist's methods.

The Frankenstein films from the 1930s, *Island of Lost Souls* and the 1931 production of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* all located their scientists within a moral, or moralistic, framework, with the scientist's actions deemed as transgressive of God's law, and with the scientist himself frequently accused of playing at being God. The extent to which this morality was meant to be taken seriously, and the extent to which it just provided some cover for the film's fascination with the scientist's illicit activities, can only really be decided by detailed reference to specific films (although generally it could be argued that these films are not as moralistic as they are sometimes made out to be). One thing is clear, however, and that is that *Doctor X* lacks this moral dimension. Instead it locates its scientist within an investigatory framework where ethical issues do not matter very much and the focus instead is on capturing the criminal.

Arguably the main reason why both *Doctor X* and *Mystery of the Wax Museum* are different from other horrors of this period has to do with the studio where they were produced. Warner Brothers was associated at this time with a realist style of film-making, as exemplified by its gangster films (including *Little Caesar* in 1930 and *The Public Enemy* in 1931) and its musicals (commencing with *Gold Diggers of Broadway* in 1929), and this realism is more than evident in its horror productions from the early 1930s, both of which were directed by Michael Curtiz who would go on to direct, among many others, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) and *Casablanca* (1942). Not only are they set in contemporary urban America (although

*Mystery of the Wax Museum* has a short European-set prologue) but they also offer versions of the street-wise, wisecracking character who would feature in gangster films and musicals as well. In *Doctor X* it is a newspaper reporter played by Lee Tracy hot on the trail of the Moon Killer while in *Mystery of the Wax Museum* it is again a reporter, albeit a female one this time, played by a fast-talking Glenda Farrell as if she has just wandered in from a *Gold Diggers* musical (and indeed Farrell herself would go on to appear in *Gold Diggers of 1935* and *Gold Diggers of 1937*).

Another distinctive feature of these Warner Brothers horrors – and one which stands in a certain tension with their realist qualities – is the way in which they, in a very self-conscious manner, invite an audience to think about its own relation to scenes of fear and horror. In *Doctor X*, for example, Dr Xavier devises an experiment to trap the Moon Killer. All the suspects will be chained to chairs and forced to watch a re-enactment of one of the Moon Killer's murders, and the killer's emotional reaction will be such that his identity will be revealed. Unfortunately, the one scientist left unchained turns out to be the Moon Killer, and the remaining scientists, including Doctor Xavier himself, watch helplessly as the killer menaces Doctor Xavier's daughter. This sequence is one of the earliest examples from horror cinema of an attempt to dramatise what it means to be a horror audience and to witness scenes of terror. The sequence stresses both the voyeuristic appeal of the experience – with the male scientists concealed in darkness spying on the scantily dressed female victim – and the powerlessness it involves, with neither the scientists nor the audience able to intervene when the potential victim is threatened. In a different but related way, *Mystery of the Wax Museum* uses the location of the wax museum itself to explore the public appetite for horrifying experiences. The sense one gains here of films drawing an audience's attention to cinema in various ways was alien to the Universal approach to horror during the 1930s, but it can also be traced in RKO's *King Kong*, the first part of which is about the making of a film, and MGM's *Mad Love*, parts of which are set in a Grand Guignol theatre, and it would subsequently become an important part of the horror genre.

A key feature of genre theory since the 1970s has been to establish what links together films belonging to a particular genre. Within such a context, any differences between genre films can become something of a problem inasmuch as they threaten a sense of generic unity, i.e. if these films are too different from each other, then perhaps they do not belong to the same genre after all. Difference is often seen in this respect as something that is contained by repetitive generic formula, with genre films different from each other only in limited, carefully circumscribed ways. Or difference becomes an expression of the historical development of a genre as sets of generic conventions gradually change over time.

Clearly an approach to horror that seeks to establish that 1930s US horror films are all more or less the same is going to have problems engaging with the sheer heterogeneity of the genre at this time. Connections between these films can be made, but these links need to be seen as operating across a whole range of differences to do not just with stylistic and thematic factors but also with the creative personnel and studios involved in the production process. It is all very well to assert, as some historians of horror have asserted, that horror of this period is organised around a series of stock figures, including the mad scientist, Frankenstein's monster, the vampire, etc., but such an approach fails to recognise that there are significant differences between the various cinematic treatments of these figures. Take the mad scientist, for example. As already noted in this chapter, Universal's *Frankenstein* is different – in terms of location and motivation – from the mad scientist in *Doctor X* (or, for that matter, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*). However, one might go further and argue that director James Whale's decidedly camp *Frankenstein* in the first two *Frankenstein* films is distinct from the rather more sombre view of the scientist offered us by director Rowland Lee in the third *Frankenstein* film, *Son of Frankenstein*. Holding up the mad scientist as a figure of cohesion within the horror genre in this period necessarily involves transforming him into an average or essential figure, with this in turn obscuring the specific narrative and stylistic contexts within which this figure is presented and developed.

Similarly, thinking about 1930s horror in terms of its relation to particular notions of modernity can be illuminating so long as one maintains an awareness that different films address modernity in different ways. Clearly, a sense of the modern is important to a lot of 1930s US horror films. One finds a fascination in many films with modern technology, not just the technologies of science but also the technologies of communication and transport. Even those Universal horror films set in an apparently feudal Europe are replete with images of trains, planes and automobiles; and the drama of many of these films, Universal and otherwise, can be seen to revolve around a confrontation between that which is perceived as modern and that which is perceived as ancient or atavistic. Yet the way in which this confrontation is managed varies considerably from one film to the next, ranging from the relatively straightforward depiction of American progressiveness versus European backwardness in *Son of Frankenstein* to the subtler distinction apparent in *Doctor X* between different forms of modernity, the alienating modernity of science and the modernity of urban life (with the latter exemplified by the wisecracking journalist), with both of these contrasted with the primal cannibalistic urges of the Moon Killer.

One other common way of connecting 1930s US horror films together is to see them as responses to, and even expressions of, fears and anxieties associated with the Great Depression. This connection between text and

context is most often made in relation to the Frankenstein films, with Frankenstein's monster identified as a powerless proletarian figure with which an economically disempowered audience might identify. (See, for example, O'Flinn, 1986.) Such readings of individual films are often interesting, and something could certainly be made in this regard of the pathos with which some 1930s movie monsters (notably King Kong) are invested. (For a pertinent discussion of Kong, see Carroll, 1984.) However, readings of this type run the risk of oversimplifying both historical context and film text. So far as the former is concerned, it should be clear that not everyone in America during the 1930s experienced the Depression in the same way, that different social groups (divided by class, race, gender, ethnicity) experienced it in ways specific to their own positions within society. Constructing a reading of any film, horror or otherwise, on the basis of there being a shared audience experience of the Depression can therefore be misleading inasmuch as it neglects divisions within American society and tends to view the Depression itself as a monolithic historical fact of which the films themselves are just a reflection. It is interesting in this respect to compare a reading of the 1930s Frankenstein monster in terms of the proletariat with other readings which see that monster either as embodying a coded representation of blackness or as part of a broader play with gender identity within the films in question (Berenstein, 1996; Young, 1996). At the very least, such readings demonstrate that there is something ambiguous or multifaceted about these films, and any readings that assume 1930s audiences all experienced the films in the same way fly in the face of our current understanding of the complex ways in which cinema audiences actually respond to and make sense of what they see.

Matters are made yet more complicated by the sheer variety of films on offer during the 1930s. There is no single type of horror film in this period, no single stylistic approach or thematic identity. Instead there are different types of horror competing for the public's attention, with Universal's horror films proving the most consistently successful in the market place. Connections can be made between films, but these are not totalising connections, i.e. they do not pull all horror films together into a cohesive unit. Certainly there was a growing awareness on the part of both film-makers and critics during the 1930s that a new cinematic category had emerged, but what actually went into that category was subject to constant renegotiation throughout the decade as different groups attempted to exploit the success of other films. To give just a few examples of this, the main reason why MGM's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), Columbia's *The Black Room* (1935) and Universal's *Tower of London* (1939) were, and continue to be, thought of as horror films is arguably that they starred Boris Karloff, an established horror icon. So far as the narrative content of the films themselves are concerned, it makes more sense to see *The Mask of Fu Manchu* as an exotic adventure story (as three

previous Fu Manchu films produced at Paramount and starring Warner Oland as the evil Doctor were seen as exotic adventures) and *The Black Room* and *Tower of London* as historical melodramas. Here the designation 'horror' operates, as it so often does in the history of the horror film, in a short-term, opportunistic manner. Similarly, a cinematic oddity like MGM's *Freaks* ends up in horror partly because Tod Browning, the man who made the 1931 *Dracula*, directed it but mainly, one feels, because no one could think of any other generic category where it might belong. *Freaks* controversially featured real-life freaks, and its disturbing representations of 'abnormal' human bodies can be seen as undermining the special effects-generated body horror on display in the likes of *Doctor X* and *Mystery of the Wax Museum*. In this respect, *Freaks* functions as a kind of anti-horror film, and its presence within horror underlines how broad and capacious that category can be.

Looking at 1930s US horror in this way shows how important it is to be sensitive as much to the differences between horror films as to their similarities. As we will see, later periods of horror production are more visibly organised around particular cycles and sequels, but even there heterogeneity is constantly apparent, with the various relationships of particular groups (including film-makers and audiences) to horror formed within the different contexts (industrial, social, national, creative, etc.) within which those groups are operating. It can be argued here that it is this quality of horror, that which makes it so difficult to define on a once-and-for-all basis, which actually makes it so interesting and lively an area of culture, and that the history of horror's commercial development after the 1930s has more of an innovative and imaginative dimension to it than has sometimes been supposed.

## HOW DOES HORROR DEVELOP?

One of the more pervasive and influential models of the history of horror cinema sees it in terms of distinct consecutive periods of development, each of which is characterised by a particular type of horror film. A snapshot of horror's development from the 1930s through to the 1970s might well look something like this.

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 1930s:       | Universal horror – <i>Dracula</i> , <i>Frankenstein</i> , <i>The Mummy</i> , etc.   |
| 1940s:       | Val Lewton's productions at RKO – <i>Cat People</i> (1942), <i>I Walked With a Zombie</i> (1943), <i>The Seventh Victim</i> (1943), etc.    |
|              | Second wave of Universal horror production – <i>The Wolf Man</i> , <i>House of Frankenstein</i> and various Abbott and Costello films.      |
| Early 1950s: | US science fiction/horror – <i>Creature from the Black Lagoon</i> , <i>It Came From Outer Space</i> , <i>The Thing from Another World</i> . |

- Late 1950s: British horror, especially films produced by Hammer – *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Dracula* (1958), *The Mummy* (1959), *Curse of the Werewolf* (1961).
- Post-1968: The modern/contemporary US horror film – *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), etc.
- Post-1978: The slasher film – *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*.

This particular version of horror's history usefully identifies some important centres of activity within the genre. However, as should already be clear from this chapter's discussion of 1930s horror, it also provides an overly streamlined picture of generic development, one which does not always take enough account of the range of different horror films available in any given period. In locating the development of horror along an American-British axis, it also marginalises other significant areas of horror production, for instance Italian horror, Spanish horror and Mexican horror. A tendency to see horror in terms primarily of American and British production, with European production only acknowledged so far as its 'art' or 'avant-garde' sectors were concerned, was especially evident in writings about horror from the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in two widely read and fairly representative examples of this type of horror history, Carlos Clarens' *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film* (first published in 1967, subsequently published in a new edition under the more user-friendly title *Horror Movies: An Illustrated Survey* (1968)) and Denis Gifford's *A Pictorial History of Horror Movies* (first published in 1973), Italian, Spanish and Mexican horror are either discussed briefly in passing or not mentioned at all. By contrast, recent critical work on Italian horror cinema in particular has assumed a prominence in writings about horror that reflects not only the sheer volume of horror production in Italy but also the quality and distinctiveness of many of these films.

Even the most cursory glance at the Italian horror film reveals that it does not fit neatly into the historical schema outlined above. Certainly the numerous Italian period horror films that appear from the early 1960s onwards can be related to the Hammer horror films inasmuch as they were seeking to appeal to those audiences who had already made Hammer such a success. (Much the same could be said for the series of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations directed by Roger Corman in America during the early 1960s.) In fact, in a number of these films the Italian film-makers even adopted English-sounding pseudonyms in order to make the films themselves appear more English, i.e. more like Hammer. At the same time, however, Italian cinema was also starting to produce what have come to be known as *giallo* films, lurid psychological thrillers in contemporary settings that often featured acts of sexual or sexualised violence. (*Giallo* – the Italian word for yellow

- referred to the yellow covers of the Italian pulp fiction from which these films drew their inspiration.) Some horror critics have argued that this type of film does not belong to the horror genre in any meaningful way, while others have seen it as comprising an important development within horror, one which in its focusing on extreme psychological states and scenes of sexual violence anticipates later American horror films. But its precise place within a cyclical model of horror history is not clear. Simply viewing it as an early version of the American slasher films of the late 1970s and early 1980s arguably misrepresents it, for in many important respects the Italian *giallo* is different from that type of film. Nor can it simply be seen as an attempt to cash in on the box-office success of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). While there might be a shared emphasis on representing madness within contemporary settings, the *giallo* favours a far more baroque and artificial approach than that adopted by Hitchcock. In any event, *Psycho* itself sits rather uneasily within a horror history that suggests that period horror is not supplanted by contemporary horror until the late 1960s.

It seems from this that at the very least account needs to be taken not only of differences within particular types of horror - for example, Italian period horror is quite distinct thematically and stylistically from British or American period horror - but also of the way in which types of horror overlap chronologically. If one looks, say, at horror in the late 1960s, clearly period horror was not swept away by contemporary horror but continued in various forms, especially in Britain, through to the mid-1970s (and resurfaces at various points later on), with some interesting work done in this area, while contemporary-setting horror films, especially in America, were only intermittently present until the huge success of *The Exorcist* in 1973 marked this type of horror as ripe for development and exploitation.

It is also clear that the relative importance of period and contemporary horror varies from one country to the next. For example, in the 1960s contemporary horror seems more firmly established within Italian cinema - primarily via the *giallo* format - than it is elsewhere. In Britain, Hammer did produce a series of contemporary-set psychological thrillers in the 1960s that were clearly designed to exploit the success of *Psycho* (although the plots of these films borrowed more from the French thriller *Les Diaboliques* than they did from Hitchcock's film), but these tended to be 'poor relations' to the better-known period films. This did not mean that British contemporary horror films were absent during the 1960s and 1970s, just that they were being produced by companies other than Hammer, for example Anglo-Amalgamated and Amicus. It follows that any account of British horror in this period that fixates solely or mainly on Hammer gives a distorted view of the relation between period and contemporary horror within British cinema. In America the situation was different again, with a mini-cycle of

contemporary-set teen-horror films appearing in the late 1950s (including notable titles *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*), *Psycho* in 1960, a mini-cycle of period adaptations of the stories of Edgar Allan Poe in the early 1960s, some early 'splatter-gore' films (including *Blood Feast* in 1963 and *Two Thousand Maniacs* in 1964) from cult director Herschell Gordon Lewis, and then little sustained horror production until the early 1970s when American horror did turn very decisively to the contemporary for its settings and its subjects.

If we look at the development of horror cinema from the 1970s onwards, the idea that any one type of horror can define a period of horror production becomes even harder to sustain. This is unsurprising, perhaps, given that this section of horror history is more familiar to us than those earlier periods of horror where a number of the films concerned have long since sunk into obscurity. Of course, there are obvious groupings to be found in modern horror – the American 'slasher' film or, to use *Variety*'s piquant term, 'teenie-kill-pic' from the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 1980s horror franchises (including the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* films), and the revival of the slasher format in the 1990s. However, one also needs to take into account, to name but a few, a significant number of films about zombies and cannibals from both Europe (especially Italy and Spain) and America, continuing production of the Italian *giallo* throughout the 1970s and 1980s, US serial killer films from the 1980s onwards, ghost stories of various kinds, Asian horror cinema, and so on.

Three films released in 2001 testify to the broadness of the horror category. *The Others* is a ghost story that harks back both to *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Haunting* (1963) but is also a film made in the shadow of the huge box-office success of another film about ghosts, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). By contrast, *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is a French production that mixes period drama with martial arts action scenes and a horror scenario involving a ferocious beast stalking through the French countryside. As this description might suggest, the film offers an eclectic mix of pop-cult references provocatively intermingled with the more stately values associated with the French heritage drama. Meanwhile *Jeepers Creepers* presents itself as a no-frills horror movie harking back to the brutal simplicity of low-budget 1970s horror and generally (but not entirely) avoiding the self-parodic approach endemic in US horror since the success of *Scream*. Each of these films is positioned differently – by the film-makers, by the films' marketing, to a certain extent by the critical responses to the films – in relation to horror, with each connected to different groups of films within horror history.

Instead of seeing horror proceeding in monolithic, lumbering fashion, relying on just one type of horror at a time, one needs to maintain both a sense of the constant variety of horror production and a sense of how this

horror production often involves the creation of retrospective pathways back through horror history. This is most visibly the case with the horror sequel, which very obviously refers back to an earlier film, but it also has a more general importance in horror, with a range of horror film-makers (including those responsible for *The Others*, *Brotherhood of the Wolf* and *Jeepers Creepers*), linking their work in different ways, for commercial and creative reasons, to what has gone before in the genre. As noted above, film scholars, and audiences too, can and do create their own pathways through horror as well, providing their own definitions of what horror is for their own purposes. Horror emerges from this as comprising not just various groups of films produced within different historical and national contexts but also the responses to and understandings of those films generated by film-makers, audiences and critics.

So far as this book is concerned, the critical method implied by this way of seeing the genre involves focusing on specific sites of production – production of films and of meaning – rather than trying to come up with some global theory of what horror is and what horror does. Having said this, it is worth noting here some broader features of horror's history that do have a noticeable material effect on the genre's variegated and international development. In particular, one needs to be aware of the significant shift that occurs in horror production at some point in the mid-1950s and which can be seen effectively to divide horror into two distinct areas or regimes. The first of these regimes runs from the early 1930s through to the early 1950s, and it is characterised by the dominance of the American horror film. Of course, one can find a few non-American horror films in this period, and the input of non-American creative personnel into American horror was a significant one, but, nevertheless, film horror is almost entirely American-produced up until the 1950s. The second horror regime commences in the late 1950s and it is characterised by production of horror films on an international basis. America no longer had a monopoly on the genre, and one can find significant centres of production throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Britain, Italy and Spain, with non-European countries entering the genre thereafter.

A number of factors were instrumental in causing this shift from one horror regime to another. The traditional Hollywood studio system, the home of most American horror production throughout the 1930s and 1940s, was broken up in the first half of the 1950s as a result of US government anti-trust legislation, with this in turn opening up opportunities for independent producers, both in America and abroad. (In particular, the British company Hammer, subsequently a market leader in the horror genre and the success of which encouraged other European companies to produce their own horror films, benefited from this new American openness to their low-budget products.) The position of cinema within western society was also changing in

the 1950s. Cinema attendances fell at this time largely as the result of leisure activities being relocated within the domestic household, with the most visible expression of this increased emphasis on the home being the growing importance of television as a mass medium. The average age of the cinema audience declined, and cinema became more of a young person's medium than it had ever been before. At the same time, both America and much of western Europe saw a gradual relaxation of film censorship, with this facilitating the production of new forms of film horror.

One can also point to broader shifts and changes occurring within western society during the 1950s and developing thereafter, with these the products both of increasing affluence and of Cold War/nuclear-age politics. Clearly one should not generalise too much about these shifts, which relate to the ways that gender, class and race function within society, and their precise impact upon horror is best established through detailed discussions of specific groups of films. However, it does seem that these changes, and the changes to cinema itself as a particular medium, helped to shape both a new institutional space for the production of horror films and, arguably, to create new cultural milieux within which horror could operate and flourish.

A number of horror historians, notable among them Andrew Tudor, have seen horror's development in terms of a move from closed narratives (where the monster is definitively destroyed) and a relative security about social authority towards open narratives (where the monster is not always definitively destroyed) and a relative insecurity about social authority (Tudor, 1989). To a certain extent, this sort of development could be mapped on to the structure I have just outlined, with the closed forms of horror associated with the first American regime and the socially conformist practices of the traditional Hollywood studio system and the open forms of horror with the second international regime and a greater willingness generally to question social norms. Ultimately, however, this is just too neat a picture of the genre. I have already suggested that notions of narrative openness are significant within US horror of the 1930s and 1940s; and other critics have argued that a number of these films do engage in critical fashion with a whole range of normative social attitudes and values. So far as post-1950s horror is concerned, one could reasonably point out that an 'open' ending does not necessarily equate with an 'open' social attitude – as some critics (although not Tudor) assume – and that in all fundamental aspects so-called 'open' horror narratives tend to be just like any other traditional narratives, i.e. they have a beginning, a middle and a conclusion. The content of the conclusion might be different, but it is still a conclusion. In other words, the narrative is not open in the way that, say, an avant-garde film might be open, provocatively refusing the pleasures of closure in order to draw an audience's attention to the nature of the cinematic institution itself.

In an article on the films of Howard Hawks, Robin Wood warns against overly general approaches to Hawks' work that obscure 'the local significances that arise from the fusion of context and concrete realization'. Instead, Wood argues, 'the life of a film is in its detail' (Wood, 1976, pp.205–6). In large part, this chapter has followed Wood's advice in arguing that the life of the horror genre is in its detail. Of course, there are connections to be made between horror films, and one can also identify elements that underpin significant sectors of the genre (as I have already suggested in discussing regimes of horror), and this book will seek to explore some of those connections and shared elements. At the same time, an approach to horror needs to be open to what might be termed here its liveliness, the way in which it exists in process, in incessant change. Looking back at 1970s genre theory, one sometimes detects a quiet desperation on the theorists' part as their attempts to define once and for all a particular genre, in effect to pin it down and stop it moving, are constantly confounded by the unexpected emergence of some generic variant that does not fit into their schema. Horror, surely one of the more protean of the mainstream genres, is particularly hostile to being pinned down. As I hope this book will demonstrate, the main reason for this is that, to borrow a phrase from Frankenstein, it's alive, alive.