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HORROR FILM

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

MURRAY LEEDER

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Horror Film

BLOOMSBURY FILM GENRES SERIES

Edited by Mark Jancovich and Charles Acland

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A Critical Introduction

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Introduction

Horror Film: A Critical Introduction provides an overview of the wide-ranging, protean and diverse genre of the horror film. As part of the *Film Genres* series, this book is designed first and foremost for a non-specialist reader, though it will hopefully have much value for the experienced horror scholar and the horror fan alike. It is structured as follows:

The first three chapters provide an overview of the history of the horror film, going as far back as the beginnings of cinema (and even before) and stretching up until the present day (roughly 2017). Though it cannot possibly be exhaustive in its coverage, I have attempted to balance industrial, national and aesthetic considerations of the genre, as well as such subjects as stardom, censorship, shifting generic parameters and the occasional availability of horror to cultural prestige. Horror is not a glassed-over relic but a living, dynamic genre, and even during the writing process I have found it a challenge to keep abreast of new developments; the book will inevitably become an artefact of the moment of its publication, but hopefully its insights will outlive its historical limitations.

The next three chapters cover major critical approaches to horror. They are divided by three interrogative pronouns: ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘who’. The fourth chapter addresses attempts to define horror and the difficulties presented by such definitions. The fifth covers attempts to address the contentious ‘why’ of horror – psychoanalytic, cognitive and affective. The sixth is the ‘who’ – who are horror’s audiences and what is their stake in the genre?

The third set of chapters deals with the aesthetics and technologies of horror film and how horror films have manipulated the ‘technological uncanny’. The three chapters deal, respectively, with film sound, colour and digital cinema, each time exploring special resonances these changes in film technology have had within the horror genre.

Horror Film: A Critical Introduction is just that, an introduction; the abused term 'scratching the surface' applies. For everything it covers, it excludes much, much more. While many national traditions of horror have been the subject of exciting and valuable scholarship in recent years (e.g. Bollywood horror (Sen 2017), Korean horror (Peirse and Martin 2013), Thai horror (Ancuta 2011), Turkish horror (Sahinturk 2016), Australian horror (Ryan 2018), Canadian horror (Vatnsdal 2014, Freitag and Loiselle 2016), etc.), *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* offers a broadly Anglo-American-centred treatment of the horror genre and its history. However, other national traditions (German, Japanese, French, Canadian, etc.) are featured throughout as well.

1

1895–1938: Horror's Process of Genrification

What was the first horror film?

There is no easy answer to this question. The box for Kino International's DVD release of D. W. Griffith's *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) declares it to be 'The First Great American Horror Film,' and yet such terminology was not used when it was released. Similar claims are sometimes made of the German film *Der Student von Prag/The Student of Prague* (1913) and the Edison Studios adaptation of *Frankenstein* (1910). But genres are not born with a single film. One could argue that the horror film is older: that it traces back to early cinema, or even could be stitched into a much longer narrative of uses of the projected image for frightening entertainment, dating back at least to the gloomy shows of the phantasmagoria that debuted in the late eighteenth century (see Castle 1995; Heard 2006). Originally exhibited in the darkness of an abandoned Capuchin monastery in Paris, phantasmagoria mixed magic lantern imagery, spooky music and layers of smoke, and favoured images of demons, skeletons and ghosts. Wrote the most famous pioneer of phantasmagoria, 'Robertson' (Étienne-Gaspard Robert), 'I am only satisfied if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them' (trans. in Elder 2008, 104). Still earlier, Leipzig illusionist and occultist Johann Georg Schröpfer used magic lanterns combined with other tricks to project ghosts, presenting himself not as a skilled magician but as

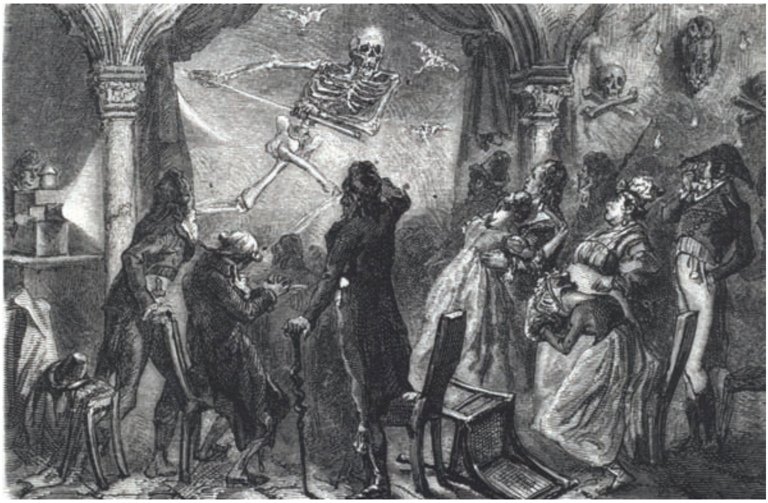

FIGURE 1.1 *A depiction of the phantasmagoria that appeared in* L'Optique *by 'Fulgence Marion' (1869).*

a legitimate necromancer who even purportedly put Prince Charles of Saxony in touch with his dead uncle. He committed suicide in 1774, reportedly driven mad by his own illusions. Should we regard Schröpfer as the first horror filmmaker?

But why stop there? Hypothetically, one can create a speculative narrative going back further, even into prehistory. In Joe Dante's film *Matinee* (1993), the fictional horror director Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman) provides his own Allegory of the Cave. Visualized with animation of a brick wall, it involves a prehistoric man surviving an encounter with a mammoth and wanting to document the event as cave art: 'And he thinks, "People are coming to see this! Let's make it good! Let's make the teeth really long and the eyes really mean." Boom! The first monster movie.' Woolsey claims himself as the inheritor to a long line of benign monster-makers to bestow legitimacy upon his profession, and many scholars of horror have constructed extravagant lineages for a similar reason. Alternatively, you could say that the horror genre was not born until the early 1930s, when terms like 'horror film' came into general parlance. All these possible answers are correct from one perspective and shortsighted from all others.

FIGURE 1.2 *The speculative 'first monster movie' in* Matinee *(1993)*.

Early cinema horror?

Some have suggested that horror in cinema, if necessarily not the horror genre, is exactly as old as cinema itself. On 28 December 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière hosted the first public screening of their Cinématographe at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris.[1] One particular film associated with this legendary event (although actually not screened until the following month) was *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat,* which simply depicts a train pulling into a station. In legend, it provoked a singular reaction: the audience screaming and jumping to their heels, maybe even running out of the room. The story was passed down unquestioned for decades. In all likelihood it never really happened, although it may reflect a kind of reality in terms of the jolting effects of an audience facing something foreign to its sensorial inventory (Bottomore 1999; Loiperdinger 2004).

But was *L'arrivée d'un train* also 'the first horror film'? It has been called so. Denis Gifford's *A Pictorial History of Horror Movies* (1973) states, 'Women had screamed the night cinema was born:

---

[1] In several senses, this mythical birthdate for cinema is inaccurate too; the first paid-for public display of the new invention, it was preceded by a variety of private demonstrations, and the term 'cinema' itself was not yet in use (see Gaudreault 2011).

a locomotive engine seemed to steam from the screen. Louis Lumière's innocent record of an everyday happening … had shock in its realistic approach' (14). Gifford is far from the only scholar desiring to extend horror's lineage to the beginnings of cinema (Diffrient 2004, 59), one way or the other, as a strategy for asserting its importance and lineage.

Others look to another moment in early cinema associated with panic, from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). *The Great Train Robbery* is considered significant as an early narrative short and an early Western (itself a misleading claim, as such a generic descriptor did not yet exist (Neale 1990, 52–5)), but for its moments of what Tom Gunning refers to as 'attractions' (1995), which breach the audience's sense of narrative absorption by confronting it directly. Notably it contains a shot of a bandit firing his pistol directly in the audience – today it is generally placed at the end of the film, but originally an exhibitor could choose its location. In *Horror in the Cinema* (1979), Ivan Butler wrote:

> It is quite possible that the famous pistol-firing close-up at the end (or the beginning, from choice) of *The Great Train Robbery* sent much the same thrill of terror through the unsophisticated audiences of 1903 as those of today are presumed to receive from the latest vampirical metamorphosis or planetary Thing which leaps or creeps at them from the contemporary screen. (15)

The documentary *Kingdom of Shadows: The Rise of the Horror Film* (1998) echoes Butler's claims as Rod Steiger's overripe narration intones 'Behold the face of horror – behold the birth of cinema' over the pistol shot.

Others look to the origins of cinematic horror in early cinema's trick films, especially those of Georges Méliès. This body of films eschew cinema's potential for representing reality in favour of its abilities to create artificial environments and events, often using film form to approximate tricks from the magical stage. There is a widespread impulse to anoint some of Méliès's early films, especially *Le Manoir du Diable* (1896, generally known in English as *The Devil's Castle*, *The Haunted Castle* or *House of the Devil*), as the first horror films. Gifford positions *Le Manoir du Diable* as an ur-moment for the horror film: 'The big, black bat flew into the castle room. It circled slowly, flapping monstrous wings. Suddenly – it changed into the Devil! It was the eve of Christmas 1896; the horror had begun' (14). Carlos Clarens's *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film* (1967) similarly positions Méliès at the beginning of cinematic horror traditions by opening with a chapter on him (1–8). The canonization of *Le Manoir du Diable* is such that scholars have characterized it as 'undoubtedly the first horror film' (Hardy 1993, 16) and 'probably the first horror movie' (Kinnard 1995, 9), and casually cited it as the moment of horror cinema's commencement (Crane 2004, 150).

However, as Mark Jancovich rightly notes, 'It is not at all clear that [Méliès's] films were understood as horror films. Instead, it is more likely that they were seen as examples of the kinds of magical trick photography that Tom Gunning associates with the "cinema of attractions"' (2002, 7). Kim Newman observes that Méliès 'was more interested in the marvelous than the horrific, setting out to surprise rather than shock' (215). Even the use of Satanic imagery running through so many of Méliès's films is part of a tradition on the magical stage and relates more closely to Méliès's anti-clerical sensibilities (perhaps most blatant in *Le Diable au Convent*/*The Devil in a Convent* (1899)) than a desire to horrify people (Mangan 2007, 134–9). The uncertain generic boundaries between horror and fantasy (see Chapter 4) are an issue here.

All of the issues of locating examples of horror in early cinema are evident in the opening lines of Tony Magistrale's *Abject Terrors: Surveying the Modern and Postmodern Horror Film* (2005):

> It is likely that the very first motion picture was a horror film. Out of the dark shadows cast by a flickering candle, exaggerated and magnified by mirrors and accompanied by the artificial introduction of smoke, Georges Méliès's *The Devil's Manor* (1896) was as much a magic trick as it was an effort to produce the first vampire film, where a bat flies into an ancient castle and transforms itself into the Devil. It is actually not that far a leap from Méliès's rudimentary experiments in blending science of German expressionism that informed the cinema of the 1920s. The environmental settings for the earliest motion pictures feature the essentials of the vampire

> film: highly stylised sets and exaggerated use of makeup on the faces of actors provide *Nosferatu* [1922] and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] with a highly psychological mise-en-scène. Lost in an angular, unnatural landscape, these early films emphasise the distortion of space and create an unsafe milieu that most resembles that of a nightmare. (xi)

Even if we ignore the fact that Magistrale seems to imply that *Le Manoir du Diable* was the first *film,* the collapse of decades of film history to blur Méliès's trick films and German expressionism illustrates the tendency to plug select examples of early cinema into a master narrative of horror's lineage. The common claim Magistrale repeats here, that *Le Manoir du Diable* is the first vampire film (see also Flynn 1992, 11–12; Stuart 1994, 218; Guiley 2005, 101; Joyce 2007, 105; Melton 2011, 448), bears particular examination. No figure in this Méliès's film – or any other – is clearly identifiable as a vampire, so this claim must be based on the film's bat-human transformation (along with a defensive cross, not originally unique to vampires). But the idea that vampires turn into bats did not yet exist. It would appear first in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* the year after.[2] Only in retrospect does *Le Manoir du Diable* become even abstractly readable as a vampire film, or as a horror film at all, so such claims necessarily take on an ahistorical quality.

What do we truly gain from regarding works from early cinema as the first horror films, be they actualities like *L'arrivée d'un train*, early narrative shorts like *The Great Train Robbery* or trick films like *Le Manoir du Diable*? Such a judgement requires wresting early cinema from its historical materiality and, once again, demoting it to a way station towards the generic traditions to emerge in the classical period. It is hardly surprising that scholars might look for the origins of the horror film in early cinema. It is undeniable that the formal vocabulary and thematic concerns of what would become known as horror film have a prehistory in early cinema. Certain early films would thus be potentially understood as part of what Thomas Schatz calls the 'experimental stage' of genre development, wherein generic conventions are present in a rudimentary form, but are not yet recognized as such (37). If there is horror in a generic sense in early cinema, it can only be described as such well in retrospect – as a kind of pre-phase to a pre-phase.

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[2] Thomas (2000) proposes that Stoker saw and was influenced by *Le Manoir du Diable* (303); this claim is obviously speculative but also difficult to disprove, since Stoker's earlier drafts did not contain references to bat transformations.

Mark Jancovich and Lincoln Geraghty note that 'one needs to be careful not to transfer one's own understandings of genre terms and their meanings back onto previous periods in which the terms and their meanings might have been very different' (3). The question 'What was the first horror film?' is thus less useful than one about genrification: just how did the recognizable and durable, and even versatile, genre called 'the horror film' emerge? The remainder of this chapter will address that question.

German expressionist cinema and horror's emergence

Several traditions of silent-era cinema are inextricably linked with the prehistory of the horror film, especially in Germany and the United States. Silent films produced elsewhere have also retrospectively been claimed as horror, notably Danish director Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan*/*Witchcraft Through the Ages* (1922) and *Kurutta Ippēji*/*A Page of Madness* (1926) by Japan's Teinosuke Kinugasa; these are inevitably less discussed because of their relative anomalousness. The major silent-era European tradition noted for contributing to the formal and thematic vocabulary of the horror film is German expressionism.

German expressionist cinema grew out of the broad artistic movement of the same name, which spanned a number of art forms (painting, architecture, sculpture, theatre, etc.) and included renowned painters Otto Dix, August Macke, Franz Marc and George Grosz. While this movement largely faded in the 1910s, many of its key players dying during the First World War, the cinematic movement is largely understood as a representative phenomenon of the postwar Weimar Republic. German Expressionist cinema inherits the earlier movement's privileging of anti-realism and the graphic depictions of inner states, and is replete with relevant Weimar themes of paralysed masculinity, industrialization and modernity, death and mourning, enforced conformity and madness (Kaes 2009). German Expressionist cinema was about far more than horror: *Der letzte Mann/The Last Laugh* (1924) veers towards social realism (while maintaining a decided counter-realist aesthetic), while *Die Nibelungen* (1924) is a fantasy film derived from German legends and *Geheimnisse einer Seele/The Secrets of a Soul* (1926) is a Freudian allegory. Nevertheless, the links to horror are undeniable. The film generally agreed to be the first work of German Expressionist cinema is 1920's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Its disjointed narrative is framed by a young man named Francis (Friedrich Feher) explaining how he became an inmate in a mental asylum. He tells the story of a mountebank named Dr Caligari (Werner Krauss) and his somnambulist servant, Cesare (Conrad Veidt), whom he sends out to murder his enemies. However, after Cesare's failed attempt to abduct Francis's fiancée, Jane (Lil Dagover), it transpires that Caligari is actually the head of a local lunatic asylum, himself driven mad after studying a legendary mystic named Caligari. But there is a further twist. It transpires that the narrator himself is insane and Caligari is actually a benign asylum director, and the film ends with the apparently positive note that the narrator may soon be cured.

However, to discuss the plotline of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* without reference to its form would be the real madness. Its artifice is everywhere on display. The town of Holstenwall is a funhouse of disorienting shapes and lines. Town clerks perch atop unnaturally high stools. Shadows are painted onto walls. A merry-go-round twirls at a wildly oblique angle. In a scene that anticipates a thousand monster-abducts-girl scenarios to follow, Cesare carries Jane over a distorted rooftop, where smokestacks point at disorienting angles towards the sky. The political and social implications of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* have been much debated, especially given the little-loved final twist (see Kracauer 1947; Eisner 2008), but its immersion into a madman's dream cements its importance in cinematic history as still the go-to example of film formalism, shown in many introductory film classes worldwide.

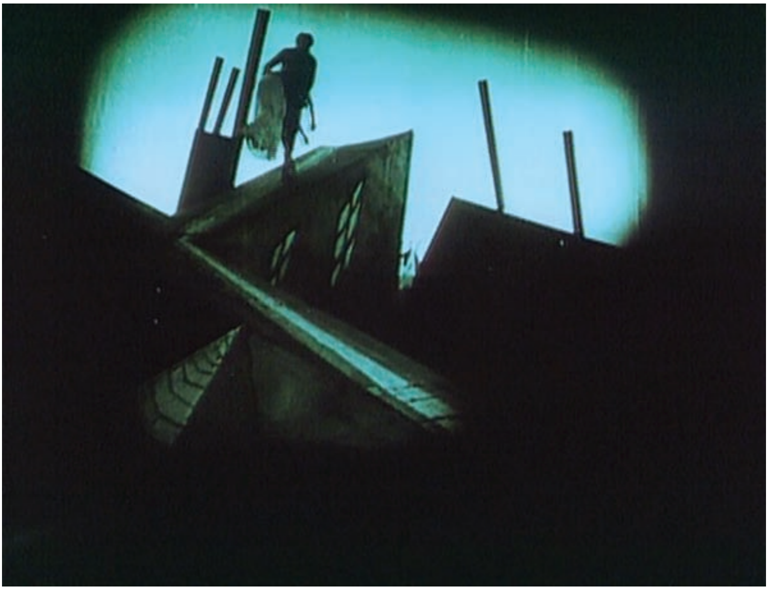

FIGURE 1.3 *The abduction in* The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari *(1920).*

But is it a horror film? The American critic Roger Ebert wrote, 'A case can be made that *Caligari* was the first true horror film.'[3] What makes earlier potential horror films 'untrue'? 'Their characters were inhabiting a recognizable world. *Caligari* creates a mindscape, a subjective psychological fantasy. In this world, unspeakable horror becomes possible' (2009, n.p.). Such criteria, of course, exist only in hindsight, but Ebert's assessment speaks to the mythological role that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* has taken in the annals of horror films. The influence of its stagecraft, especially on the Golden Age of Horror Film, is pronounced and will be returned to later in this chapter.

Equally significant is *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (henceforth *Nosferatu*), directed by F. W. Murnau. Older sources often characterize *Nosferatu* as the first adaptation of Stoker's *Dracula*; we now know that to be otherwise, since *Drakula halála*

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[3] Compare Danny Peary's description of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as 'the first *horror* film of true, lasting distinction' (48, emphasis original).

(1921) had been produced in Hungary the year prior (Rhodes 2010). Both films were unauthorized adaptations, and Murnau changed the names of characters and reset the story in Germany in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid legal action by Stoker's widow. Though the film was never strictly unavailable in the United States (it ran for a few months at the Film Guild Cinema in New York City in 1929/1930), *Nosferatu* led a subterranean existence until it was widely rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s. As such, its influence on the genrification process of horror was more minor than might otherwise have been the case. The concept that vampires are destroyed by sunlight, present neither in European folklore nor in the nineteenth-century vampire fiction of John Polidori, J. Sheridan Le Fanu or Stoker, was introduced by *Nosferatu* but would occasionally reappear before being firmly codified by *Horror of Dracula* (1958). Likewise, the depiction of the vampire, known in the original release as Graf Orlak (Max Schreck), as an obviously monstrous being with a chalk-white face, rat-like teeth and elongated fingers, would seldom be replicated before Tobe Hooper's miniseries *Salem's Lot* (1979) and Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*/*Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) because of its limited availability.[4] *Nosferatu* serves as an example of how even a great film's influence can be forestalled by circumstance.

Other Expressionist films have dark supernatural and psychological themes. *Orlacs Hände*/*The Hands of Orlac* (1924) involves a pianist losing his hands in a train accident, having the hands of a murderer sewed on in their place and finding himself with homicidal urges. *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*/*The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920) builds on the ancient Jewish myth of a Frankensteinian creature animated from clay to protect a community, but which in a true monster-movie form becomes uncontrollable. In *Schatten – Eine nächtliche Halluzination*/*Warning Shadows* (1923), a magical trickster invades a party of nobles, steals their shadows and forces them to watch the inevitable consequences of their decadent behaviour play out. The anthology film *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*/*Waxworks*

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[4] Later films to pay homage to Orlak's design include *Subspecies* (1991), *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014) and even *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002).

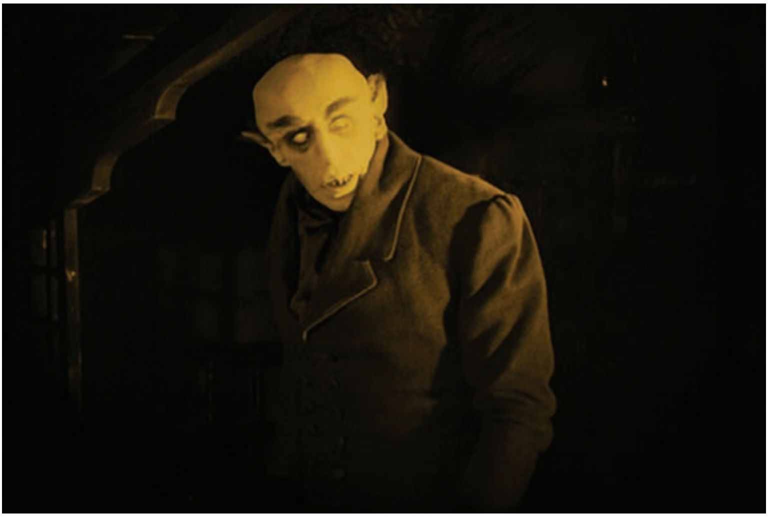

FIGURE 1.4 *Graf Orlak (Max Schreck) in* Nosferatu *(1921).*

(1924) features a nightmarish depiction of Jack the Ripper, staged with multiple layers of superimpositions. And Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), a science fiction allegory taking place in a hyper-urban future, contributed immensely to the visual vocabulary of the mad scientist movie, with Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) as an influential amalgam of alchemist and scientist; the creation of the Machine-Maria (Brigitte Helm) constitutes one of the most influential set pieces for the development of the horror film.

One need not resort to speculation to explain the influence of German expressionism on the Hollywood horror film of the 1930s. The draw of Hollywood and the fear of fascism drew some of the personnel who worked on the Expressionist films to the United States. Karl Freund, cinematographer of *The Golem* and *Metropolis*, emigrated in 1928, shot *Dracula* in 1931 and later directed *The Mummy* (1932) and *Mad Love* (1935), a remake of *The Hands of Orlac*; he ended out his career doing live cinematography for *I Love Lucy* (1951–7). Paul Leni, director of German Expressionist films including *Waxworks*, moved to Hollywood and made two films, shortly to be discussed, remembered as key works in the canon of American silent horror. While it is reductive to consider German expressionism as merely a stage on the road to the American horror film (or, for that matter, film noir, similarly indebted to expressionism), it was certainly a key contributor to the genrification of the horror film that would more fully take shape in the United States in the 1930s. With the migration of Expressionist personnel came a certain taste for artistic experimentation, something traditionally more permissible in horror than in most other Hollywood genres.

Silent Hollywood horror

For all the mythological status D. W. Griffith holds as the 'Father of Film,' or more plausibly, the codifier of the classical Hollywood model, few anoint Griffith as a 'Father of Horror'. Yet, as already mentioned, some have identified his film *The Avenging Conscience* as an early horror film, and certainly the strange Poe-inspired work sports its share of nightmarish imagery (and a twist that somewhat anticipates *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) alongside Griffithian staples like last-minute rescues. Even referring to silent Hollywood horror is anachronistic, since that terminology did not exist and most 'silent horror films' were received as melodramas.

The key figure of American silent horror was not a director but an actor: Lon Chaney, 'The Man of a Thousand Faces'. We belatedly refer to him as Lon Chaney Sr. to distinguish himself from his actor son (born Creighton Chaney, the son adopted the father's name only for career reasons), and also as America's first horror star, a label never used in his lifetime. Raised by two deaf parents, Chaney became an extraordinarily skilful pantomime performer. Working since his teens in the theatre, Chaney also honed his talents as a makeup artist, and from 1919 until his death in 1930, he was a bona fide movie star, specializing in playing disabled and disfigured characters. Chaney found his creative match in director Tod Browning, who had his own colourful circus/carnival background (Skal 1995) and an obsession with gloomy, melodramatic material. The two collaborated ten times, including the sensationally bizarre circus-set drama *The Unknown* (1927) and the early vampire film *London after Midnight* (1927), probably the most famous lost film of its era. Chaney played legless in *The Penalty* (1920), armless in *The Unknown*, wheelchair bound in *West of Zanzibar* (1928), a criminal ventriloquist in both the silent and the sound version of *The Unholy Three* (1925, 1930), the title role in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and a gamut of other racial types and categories of disability. Many have interpreted the 1920s' striking obsession with disfigurement as a consequence of the mass context of disfigurement and injury following the First World War (Skal 2001, 71).

Probably the most famous Chaney film is *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). It was a lavish, expensive production from Universal Pictures, based on the 1911 novel by French author Gaston Leroux, the rights to which were secured by producer Carl Laemmle as an ideal Chaney vehicle. Chaney plays Erik, the titular phantom, actually a flesh-and-blood mad genius, disfigured from birth. Erik haunts the bowels of the Paris Opera House, composing music, manipulating the opera's directors and secretly shepherding the career of the young ingénue Christine Daaé (Mary Philbin). Alongside the early Technicolor masquerade scene (see Chapter 8), the most famous scene in the film is the unmasking. Erik takes Christine to his subterranean lair. He sits at his organ, unaware that she is directly behind him, and her curiosity (and ours) builds over what hides behind his mask. After several false starts, she pulls it off, and the angle reverses to show us his disfigured, skull-like face. Even through all the makeup, Chaney clearly registers a terrifying mix of surprise, embarrassment and outrage. Christine rears back in shock and we switch to her point of view, a low angle of the domineering and terrifying Erik, a haze of fear blurring the screen. 'Feast your eyes,' an intertitle reads. 'Glut your soul on my accursed ugliness!' Audiences did just that, and the unmasking scene is reputed to have induced fainting in its original audiences. *The Phantom of the Opera* constructs a mix of sympathy and revulsion for the unfortunate Erik in large part through Chaney's performance. The inimitable Chaney would die of throat cancer in 1930 after making only one talkie, Browning's sound remake of their earlier film *The Unholy Three*, creating a talent vacuum at the beginning of the classic era of sound horror.

Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was adapted many times in the silent era, both in Europe (Murnau's *Der Janus-Kopf* (1920), an unauthorized

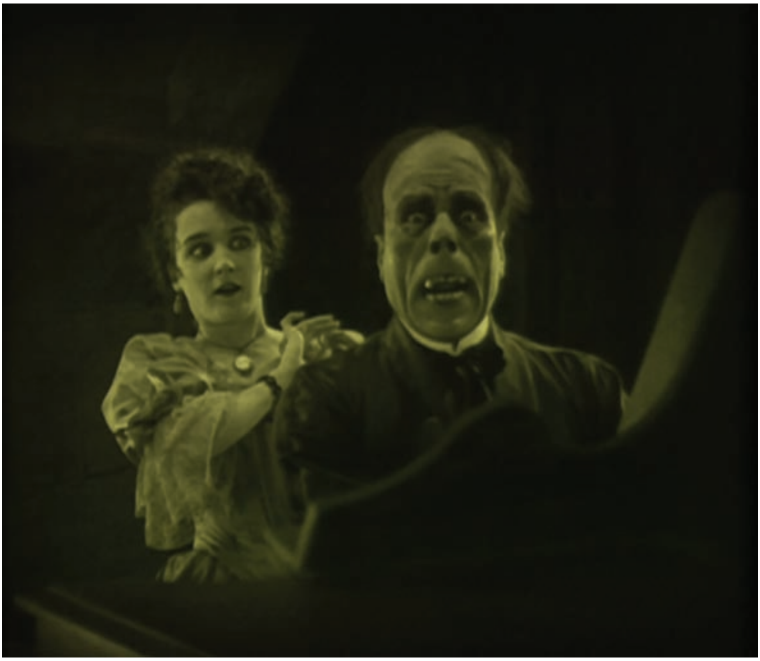

FIGURE 1.5 *Erik (Lon Chaney) unmasked in* The Phantom of the Opera *(1925).*

adaptation like *Nosferatu*) and in the United States. Before founding Universal Pictures, Carl Laemmle produced a version in 1913 for his earlier company, Independent Moving Pictures, and the previous year, the Thanhauser Company produced another version. The most famous, however, was Famous Players-Lasky's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920),[5] with its subtle and powerful performance by John Barrymore representing an early example of a prestige star cast in horror material. Wrote *Moving Picture World*, 'Mr. Barrymore justifies the terrible repulsiveness of the character by the truth and power of his impersonation. It is worthy to rank along side the Mephistopheles of Henry Irving or the Berruccio of Edwin Booth. The screen has

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[5] A different adaptation (the third, counting *Der Janus-Kopf*) was made in 1920 starring Sheldon Lewis.

never before known such great acting' (qtd. in Soister and Nicolella 2012, 154), although the *New York Times* held that 'high praise of the photoplay, however, must be limited to what Mr. Barrymore does it in' (ibid., 153). Prestige came to the nascent horror genre in scattered, qualified segments.

Separate to these serious-toned dramas about deformity and transformation, another cycle of silent Hollywood horror melded chills with comedy.[6] Epitomizing the comedic tradition is *The Cat and the Canary* (1927), directed by Paul Leni for Universal. It is based on the 1922 Broadway play of the same name by John Willard, concerning a group of family members descending on a creepy old mansion twenty years after the death of its patriarch Cyrus West, all seeking to claim his fortune. The virtuous protagonist, Annabelle West (Laura La Plante), is set to inherit it, but only provided she spends one night in the house and remain sane in the morning. Her sanity is sorely tested overnight, with a long-fingered hand reaching from secret panels in walls and a mysterious figure stalking the hallways. However, it transpires that these events are all being staged by one of Annabelle's cousins, scheming to drive her insane and claim the inheritance for himself.

This plot summary does not necessarily suggest a comedy, but *The Cat and the Canary* certainly is one, with the bumbling leading man Creighton Hale providing the broadest humour. Though *The Cat and the Canary* is the best remembered, it was neither the first nor the last of these Broadway-derived horror–comedy films. The 1909 play *The Ghost Breaker* was filmed in 1914 and 1922 (as well as in the sound era as *The Ghost Breakers* (1940) and *Scared Stiff* (1953)), the 1920 play *The Bat* was filmed several times (1926, 1956), the 1925 play *The Gorilla* was adapted in 1927, 1930 and 1939, and the 1922 play *The Monster* was adapted with Chaney in 1925. D. W. Griffith's

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[6] In a sense, these pictures descend from the haunted hotel films of early cinema, where a weary traveller would check into a hotel only to comically find himself beset by invisible, playful forces, taking full advantage of cinema's potential for disappearances, sudden transpositions and sometimes motion animation. Méliès's *L'auberge ensorcelée/The Bewitched Inn* (1897), Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel* (1900), J. Stuart Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* (1907) and Segundo de Chomón's *La maison ensorcelée/The House of Ghosts* (1908) are among the best examples.

One Exciting Night (1922) was a pastiche of *The Bat*. This cycle is often retrospectively referred to with the label 'old, dark house,' derived from the 1932 film *The Old Dark House*.

Owing to Leni's Expressionist roots, *The Cat and the Canary* is full of gorgeous chiaroscuro lighting, a complex interplay of light and shadow, and uses superimpositions throughout (Natale 2015). The opening shows the exterior of the mansion dissolving onto the spotlit wheelchair-bound Cyrus West, with the turrets of the house becoming medicine bottles towering all around him. Superimposed cats appear all around him and he rises and tries to fend them off with his hands, representing his descent into madness caused by his grasping relatives. Leni's film plays like a missing link between German expressionism and the American silent horror tradition.

The same can be said of Leni's subsequent feature for Universal, *The Man Who Laughs* (1928); Leni would direct one more film, a spiritual sequel to *The Cat and the Canary* called *The Last Warning* (1929), before dying of sepsis that year. Like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Man Who Laughs* was an expensive, lavish production based on a French novel (by Victor Hugo) and features a disfigured protagonist. Conrad Veidt, who played Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, portrayed Gwynplaine, mutilated as a child as punishment for his father's treason with a permanent grin carved into his features. Reputedly, the creators of Batman modelled the Joker on Veidt's makeup, designed by Jack Pierce. Though hideous, Gwynplaine is a gentle, tortured soul, and the story has a tragic structure, with psychosexual material underscored once again by Leni's Expressionist stylistics. Ian Conrich characterizes *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Man Who Laughs* as 'Universal's trilogy of horror-spectaculars' (2004a, 54), but notes the financial failure of the latter – an expensive silent film released just as silents were becoming unfashionable.

The conversion to sound, in the history of the horror film as in so many other respects, thus creates a narrative of simultaneous continuity and rupture. The deaths of key figures like Leni and Chaney encourage the narrative of the newness of sound cinema, as does the demise of the costly horror-spectacular. However, the continued presence of many technicians (like Karl Freund, Jack Pierce and Charles D. Hall, art director of *The Man Who Laughs*, who would create the