

## 16:9 in English: Shadowplays: Tod Browning's 'Dracula' and Karl Freund's 'The Mummy'

Af [MAXIMILIAN LE CAIN](#)

While not as acclaimed as James Whale's *Frankenstein* movies, as virtuosic as Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) or as astoundingly modern as Ulmer's masterpiece *The Black Cat* (1934), Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932) are among the strangest and most fascinating horror films of their time. They are linked by a basic storyline, the latter film being essentially a remake of the former, and by the presence of Freund, cinematographer on Browning's film as well as director of *The Mummy*. Although *The Mummy* emerges as a more consistently satisfying film, *Dracula* is endowed with formal potentialities that have yet to be fully explored, even if the film as a whole ultimately lacks the rigour necessary for their fully effective application.

### Theatre of Distortions

These 'potentialities' arise from the distortions engendered by the transposition of a largely theatrical spatiality to the screen, distortions from which a metaphysical concept of space is created through the opposition of light and darkness and the implications of the limited dimensions of the stage. *Dracula* is still too often dismissed as 'theatrical', an epithet that remains loaded with antiquated prejudice in spite of repeated proofs that the theatrical is as worthy a subject and even a style for the cinema as any other. The collision between stage and screen that *Dracula* is witness to should suffice alone to prove the value of creative intercontamination.

How are *Dracula*'s images theatrical? In the unusual emphasis on wide shots and a predominantly frontal *mise en scene*. In the way actors are integrated into the sets that they people, seldom dominating the space around them but existing within it. In the unusual depth of many images, achieved not through a Wellesian deep focus but rather by a receding arrangement of flat planes. In the minimisation of close ups.

These stylistic features only become exceptional when examined in the light of the stage-screen inequalities they so fascinatingly highlight. An exaggerated example of the sort of distortion that takes place when film treats theatre in terms of its live effect without taking into account the modifications necessary for the lens to convey a similarly vivid impression: an actor stands in a spotlight on an otherwise dark stage and recites a monologue. He is able to command the full attention of the audience. The focus of his presence can render the darkness around him almost neutral. The most obvious way to create an approximate cinematic analogue for this hypothetical recitation would be to film the actor in close up. If, however, he were to be filmed in conditions literally identical to those of his stage performance, in long shot from the point of view of a spectator in the auditorium, he would appear distractingly dwarfed by the volume of darkness surrounding him and indistinctly proportioned in relation to the film frame. The darkness would acquire a plastic density and, within the dynamics of the image, vie more equally with the speaker for control of the screen.

Although deliberately extreme, the situation described above is only an



Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula in Tod Brownings film from 1931.

overemphasis of the film/theatre visual mismatch which *Dracula* so intriguingly plays on. Its images often appear as theatrical compositions shoehorned into the 35mm frame and not quite fitting, remaining slightly off-kilter by the standards of traditional Hollywood aesthetics but off-kilter in a way consistently designed to highlight off screen space. The interplay between the image and the suggestion of almost invariably dark off screen space is *Dracula's* central stylistic feature, one which assumes metaphysical dimensions when considered (and experienced) in terms of luminosity: the small, vulnerable 'stage' of light adrift in an indeterminable void of darkness. This encompassing darkness is far too insistently present to be considered merely an atmospheric but largely neutral 'frame' to the action, as one might find in many similarly theatrical films.

The 'stage' becomes reality as understood by those on the side of light, the cozy version of normality that surrounds Mina (Helen Chandler), her father and fiancé. Yet the film's visuals make clear that it is at best a flimsy, minimal 'stage set' of a world adrift in an unstable and tenebrous 'offstage' that almost constantly pierces the fragile and porous fabric of luminous human environments. And it is from this 'offstage', this abstract space ceaselessly generating surprise and enchantment, that darkness seeps in. Yet 'offstage' is, of course, not identical to 'offscreen' and the difference is crucial: the offstage, although possessing an enormous potential for suggesting action occurring outside the realms of immediate visibility, retains the literal dimensions of the theatre whereas off screen space can seem limitless in its indeterminability.

### **Off Screen Anxieties**

Off screen space in *Dracula* calls attention to itself visually by making the spectator's eye constantly aware of it. As mentioned earlier, it is frequently dark, but its darkness is not necessarily confined to the screen's peripheries. It is also present as background. Many of the sets are designed as a receding arrangement of flat planes and often the last of these is simply darkness, the darkness of impenetrable shadow or a window open onto the night. Of course there are exceptions—sometimes a shot's background plane is pure light, but this light is almost invariably set in contrast with oppressive planes of darkness closer to the foreground. On the few occasions when the framing is not frontal, these planes of darkness frequently find an equivalent in prominent concentrations of shadow in corners. The most extreme examples occur when 'off screen space' dominates the frame, that is, in exterior images which are almost completely dark, save for small patches of light, mainly in the background. The presence of darkness is consistent enough to give *Dracula* a sense of visual unity.

The compositions and the sets often draw the spectator's gaze past the actor, deeper into the frame. Sometimes this use of open compositions is overt, more often it is subtle, but an unsettling awareness of a spatial void opening up behind the action is ever present. On a stage, this actor/set balance would be perfectly gauged to focus the viewer's whole attention on the action. But there is just a little too much darkness here for it to work in the same way on screen. This is what is meant in describing *Dracula's* visuals as being, by ordinary standards, off-kilter. The cumulative power of image after image with just a little 'too much' darkness or, at least, 'too much' emphasis on darkness, soon creates an impressive vertigo. This 'spatial void' gaping behind the actors is pregnant with mystery and incident—people and monsters come out of the darkness and vanish back into it. Again, one thinks of movements on a stage, but the limits of *Dracula's* 'stage' border an ontological matrix of darkness.

### **Searching the Darkness**

If darkness is the fabric of *Dracula's* universe, then it is only logical that disorientation should play a part in the film's style. It is present both visually and in the film's awkwardly elliptical construction, especially in the second half. Spatial disorientation might seem contradictory to a work that largely respects the rigid dimensions of the stage but space in *Dracula* has an existence that is unusually independent of the camera. The 'stage' of events is not fixed and neither is the camera fixed to it.

On the contrary, the camera seems forever seeking the action out, standing at a tentative distance from the actors, as if unsure of what events might be about to confront it, or dollying tentatively forward into the darkness, as if exploring the space before it. Sometimes there is even the impression of having arrived at an event too late and missed it, as in the cryptically staged attack on a little girl in a nocturnal graveyard. Such jarringly elliptical exposition is at least partially due to the juxtaposition of long, theatrical dialogue scenes with abrupt attempts to 'open up' the play *Dracula* is adapted from for cinema. This results in a fragmentary, sometimes almost apparently random narrative structure that frequently calls upon viewers to re-orient themselves with regard to the developing plot at the start of scenes.

From this perspective, common ground between *Dracula* and *cinema verite* becomes discernable- an assemblage of events apparently seized in the heat of the moment in which what takes place off screen is frequently as crucial as what is filmed. The camera's distance and hesitancy before the action resembles that of a documentary crew unable to predict exactly what is about to happen. This is the paradox of *Dracula*: a patently artificial universe predicated on abstracted theatricality is filmed with a Bazinian respect for 'reality' and put together like a documentary. Not the documentary record of a stage production as the 'stage' is enveloped in and destabilised by the broader context of an unstable void of darkness which is at least as much the 'reality' before the camera as the performances. Yet the tangibility of this 'void' arises from the very fact of theatrical space being filmed as if it were an organic reality with its fantastical events unfolding independently of the camera's attempts to capture them. The perverse power suggested by this radical marriage of high artifice and documentary humility still awaits satisfactory elaboration in modern cinema.

### Excavating Narratives

The fascination of *Dracula* stems from its sense of immanent chaos and confusion, an unstable universe almost randomly manifesting evil forces; *The Mummy*, on the other hand, is focused and precise, its supernatural energies operating along determinedly interpersonal channels. This shift in emphasis is echoed in the camerawork. Both films share the same probing dolly shots that cover a space in medium close up before alighting on a character. In *Dracula* these shots are exploratory and full of trepidation, as if unsure as to what they will discover in the dark; in *The Mummy* they are assertive, drawing the viewer towards the action with a relentless determination.

The fundamental difference between the movies is that *The Mummy* is a tragic love story, the vampire's naked appetite for blood having been supplanted by the exigencies of an undying love. Both films climax with the monsters being prevented from killing the heroine in order to revive her as a living dead being. But undead ancient Egyptian priest Imhotep's (Boris Karloff) motive is a desire to resurrect the woman he loved 3,700 years before, the Princess Anckesenamun, rather than to wreak destruction for its own sake. Imhotep is arrogant, ruthless and chilling; he kills those who stand in his way. But, unlike *Dracula*, his evil deeds are a means rather than an end. His pursuit of the heroine, Helen (Zita Johann) is due to her status as a reincarnation of Anckesenamun, rather than to unbridled (blood)lust.

The conflict in *The Mummy* doesn't occur at the level of light and space so much as in clashing narratives mismatched in time: Ancient, 'exotic' Egypt plaguing then-modern English colonialism. In this respect, it is most appropriate that the heroes are archeologists who have inadvertently excavated the narratives attached to the artifacts they discover. The 'mummy', Imhotep, is only seen as such in the opening scene. His unbandaged appearance ten years later reveals a walking antiquity, frail and wizened, with parchment-like skin and an aversion to being touched. Yet this apparent frailty is offset by a tremendously commanding, often literally hypnotic presence conveyed through a gaze of exceptional intensity. Exquisite manners and a steely, patrician understatement in voice and action complete the image of this very singular horror film creation. Rather than being overtly frightening or



Still from Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932).

monstrous, Karloff's character radiates a severe and uncanny beauty.

### Girls from Graves

The locus of the conflicting narratives is the character of Helen or, rather, the two characters that inhabit her body. Born of an English father and an Egyptian mother from a family "with a tree a mile long", Helen is at once a modern, western woman and the reincarnation of princess and priestess Anckesenamon. In the battle for her identity that the film dramatises, it refuses to take sides as unequivocally as one might expect. Although much is made of Imhotep's relationship with the afterlife, there is no explanation as to how Anckesenamon's soul ended up in Helen's body- a vague allusion to heredity hardly sufficing to explain a reincarnation. Reincarnation is never conceptualised in the dialogue with the result that the audience is never certain which, if either, of the two women has greater right to Helen's body. Nor is this duality ever really resolved.

The chief agents of these two narratives, Anckesenamon's and Helen's, are the two men fighting to possess her: Imhotep and young archeologist Frank (David Manners). With Imhotep, she somnambulistically reverts to her ancient character. To help achieve this he creates for her an ancient Egyptian costume and *mise en scene* at his home. Just as his soul occupies a dead body, everything connected with the narrative he is attempting to accomplish needs a prop to manifest itself.

Frank, on the other hand, represents the pull of physical reality. *The Mummy* is again surprising in its ambiguity over what would in most films be a clear-cut struggle between the forces of life and death. It does this by making Frank's courtship of Helen almost as troubling in its implications as Imhotep's. Both of them pursue her with a brutal relentlessness born of *amour fou*. The hitherto prosaic and insensitive Frank falls insanely in love with her as soon as he sees her. In the course of their first conversation, he astonishingly confesses that in opening Anckesenamon's tomb, in handling her personal belongings and seeing her in her sarcophagus, he fell in love with her and his passion for Helen stems from her resemblance to the ancient princess. Helen responds by joking: "Do you have to open graves to find girls to fall in love with?" From this perspective, Frank's attempts to win her away from Imhotep can be seen as a sort of an archaeological work, as battling with the past for rights of possession over its treasures. But for Helen, her identity and affections torn between a necrophiliac and a walking corpse, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the boorish Frank is preferable to the elegant Imhotep.

The film's ending sees her rejecting Imhotep but even this doesn't necessarily signify Frank's complete victory because it remains tantalisingly doubtful that Helen has surmounted her schizophrenic state.

What lends *The Mummy* the extra dimension of uncanniness that really distinguishes it is that the heroine is actually neither Helen nor Anckesenamon. In an otherwise perfectly cast movie, Zita Johann's complete failure to incarnate the mystery required to make her complex character believable affects everything around her. She looks like a pretty waitress who's been through a couple of intensive sessions with Henry Higgins, a girl in fancy dress earnestly trying to live up to the fairytale character she is imitating. Her excessive sincerity is rather hypnotic, but it is the sincerity of a machine going through its paces. This gives Helen the dimension of seeming to be in fact a third, quite ordinary woman whose own narrative has been suppressed. She has become a blank screen reflecting the twisted masculine fantasies of Imhotep, Frank and even the filmmakers behind the camera who are so wrapped up in willing their version of her into being that her true identity becomes invisible to them, even while remaining clear to the audience. There is, latent in her, a whole different reality which everyone, herself included, ignores. Thus *The Mummy's* focus of obsession becomes a blind spot amidst chimeras, suggestive of a sort of Russian doll of reality and illusion- Imhotep's past surrounding Frank's present

surrounding the unopened reality of Ms Johann's playing at movie star. This poetic study of stories invading and controlling bodies like a disease makes it safe to conclude that *The Black Cat* was certainly not the only 1930s horror film to prefigure the baroque cinema of Raoul Ruiz.



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