

# “The Finest Examples of Motion Picture Art”: Prestige, Stardom and Gender in the Critical Reception of Silent and Early Sound Horror

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**“The Finest Examples of Motion Picture Art”:  
Prestige, Stardom and Gender in the Critical Reception  
of Silent and Early Sound Horror**

Shane Brown and Mark Jancovich

### **Introduction**

Although research on horror often presents the genre as a disreputable one, the following essay demonstrates that a very different picture is suggested if one examines the critical reception of horror films released during silent and early sound eras. Certainly, during the 1910s, the US film industry made a bid for respectability, so that it could appeal to affluent, middle class audiences; and those aspects of horror that were understood as lower class, melodramatic entertainment were a problem for this bid. However, by no means were all horror materials seen as a problem and, by the 1920s, the genre was primarily understood as “artistic” and one that demonstrated the potential of the new medium of cinema. Consequently, as we will demonstrate, the horror film not only attracted top directors and stars but was also associated with female audiences, audiences that were crucial to Hollywood’s bid for cultural respectability.

The tendency to associate the horror film with disreputable and even low-budget productions is rooted in particular trends in film scholarship; and it is crucial to Robin Wood’s (1986) influential account of the genre, in which he claims that the genre’s disreputability “sets it apart from other genres: it is restricted to aficionados and complemented by total rejection, people tending to go to horror films either obsessively or not at all” (77). This claim is also linked to his presentation of the genre as a low-budget one that exists outside of Hollywood norms (or at least marginal to them) so that it is also “the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive” (Wood 1986, 84).

Elsewhere, Barbara Klinger has discussed the idea of the “progressive” text in film studies, and the ways in which this idea is used to differentiate certain texts from “mainstream” Hollywood cinema in aesthetic or ideological terms, and so bestow a sense of distinction upon them (Klinger 1984). Similarly, Mark Jancovich (2002) and Greg Taylor (1999) have (in different ways) demonstrated the importance of “cult” readings to the development of film criticism, a strategy that also privileges some texts

at the expense of others. Furthermore, Klinger, Jancovich and Taylor show not just how this operates in relation to specific films, but also that it privileges specific sections of the film industry, so that distinction is conferred upon low-budget films, and upon specific genres (such as western, horror, and film noir), which have been claimed to exist outside of, or marginal to, Hollywood norms. For example, not only did Andrew Sarris identify himself as a “cultist,” but he argued that “The so-called ‘big’ pictures were particularly vulnerable to front-office interference, and that is why the relatively conventional genres offer such a high percentage of sleepers” (Sarris 1976, 247). In this way, the film critic not only acquires a distinction that marks them off from common viewers—they can identify the hidden gems in the mass of Hollywood product—but this distinction gives them a purpose: they become the arbiters of cultural value.

Consequently, while Wood’s work on horror is hardly current, his association between horror on the one hand, and low budget and/or disreputable cinemas on the other, is constantly recycled today. This is partly due to his huge influence on academic studies of the horror film, but it is also because of the dynamics of film studies as a practice; and the persistence of this idea can be seen recently in relation to David Church’s writings on “post-horror” (Church 2021). Here, Church challenges the association between horror and the low budget and/or disreputable, and explores recent forms of cinematic horror that are explicitly presented as “elevated” above the genre more generally. However, he simultaneously illustrates the persistence of this association: if recent promotion and/or criticism presents some contemporary horror films as distinguished or “evaluated,” this presentation draws on (and reproduces) the assumption that horror is commonly associated with the low budget and the disreputable.

Of course, we acknowledge that, even before “post-horror,” some horror films have been seen as “elevated” examples of cinema. Various films (such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] and *The Shining* [1980]) have been distinguished from both the low budget and the disreputable. But these films are usually presented as exceptional cases and usually isolated from the genre in general. To put it another way, if various individual films have been given an “elevated” status, there is still too little analysis of how *the genre* has been understood and evaluated in the past.

This essay therefore builds on work done elsewhere on both the 1940s and the 1960s, where we have shown that the horror film has long been associated with high-budget productions that were targeted at mainstream audiences, and these films were often the most influential horror productions, at least in terms of industrial trends (See Jancovich 2017a and 2017b). Our point here is that the same is true in the silent and early sound period. Films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931) were hardly low-

budget productions, and they were hardly disreputable either. Both were adaptations of major theatrical hits, and both featured name directors (Tod Browning and James Whale) and respected actors from the theatre (Colin Clive, Bela Lugosi and Edward Van Sloan). Furthermore, they did not initiate a cycle of 1930s horror films, as is usually claimed. On the contrary, as Jancovich (2021) has demonstrated, they emerged from a cycle of horror films that started in the 1920s, even if they sent that cycle in some new directions.

One objection to our arguments about the status of silent and sound cinema might be that, as some critics claim, the films of this period were not horror films and that the horror genre did not exist before 1931 (See, for example, Benschhoff 2014; Hutchings 2004; Phillips 2018; Rhodes 2018a).<sup>1</sup> However, as Jancovich and Shane Brown (2022) demonstrate, the films of this period were clearly understood in terms of genre at the time, and the genre with which they were associated was clearly referred to as “horror,” a genre that was associated with a series of familiar plots and features, such as settings, props, and so forth (Jancovich and Brown 2022). Certainly, the term most commonly used to describe this generic “type” was not “horror” and, for various reasons, these films were more often discussed in terms of “mystery,” a term that did not distinguish “horror” from “detective stories.”<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the terms “horror” and “detective stories” were used interchangeably so that, on *Frankenstein’s* original release, *Variety* assumed that the “audience for this type of film is probably the detective story readers” (Rush 1931c). Both horror and detective stories were understood as featuring an investigation into seemingly inexplicable mysteries, mysteries that were associated with the strange, eerie and uncanny.

Some might also object that we are working with a definition of the genre that is too broad and that some of the films that we discuss are not actually horror films at all (even if the term existed). However, it is crucial to our method that we not start without an attempt to define the genre at all. On the contrary, our approach acknowledges that genres are understood in

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<sup>1</sup> For a different view of the period, see Spadoni 2007. Tom Gunning also offers an interesting intervention on horror in the silent period, although his focus is on responses to cinema in the 1890s, where it was viewed as an uncanny medium (Gunning 1995). The problem, for our purposes, is that we found very little evidence that the cinematic medium was seen in this way by the 1920s, and his account is largely a theoretical one that does not discuss specific films from the period or how they were generically understood at the time. Finally, Gunning’s article calls for a medium-specific definition of genre, a strategy to which we have various objections. Most centrally, it largely ignores the fact that many of the horror films of the silent and early sound period were adaptations of theatrical hits (or imitations of theatrical hits) that sought to enhance the reputation of cinema through its association with the theatre. Even the German Expressionist classics were (as Thomas Elsaesser notes) imitations of art in other media: again, the film industry imitated these other media in the hope of acquiring cultural caché through an association with them (see Elsaesser 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See also Rhodes 2018b.

different ways in different historical periods and, rather than limit our study to the examination of films that fit generic definitions developed in later periods, our analysis of the silent and early sound period focuses on those films that were identified as (or associated with) the horror genre by critics at the time.

When the genre is approached in this way, it becomes clear that the films associated with horror were hardly understood as being disreputable productions, but were often associated with high culture (and not just through their status as adaptations). Again, in this period, horror was often understood as an *artistic* genre that not only enabled the stylistic experimentation essential to the new medium of cinema but, in the process, the genre was also used to sell the cinema to affluent, middle class audiences. Not only were many of the “artistic” films from Europe associated with horror, but reviewers saw foreign directors such as Paul Leni, and even “home-grown” actors such as Lon Chaney, as key exponents in their cinematic professions.

The industry’s pursuit of respectability also meant that female, rather than male, viewers were seen as the crucial audience.<sup>3</sup> As Douglas Gomery has pointed out, exhibitors recognised that they could make more money from affluent, middle class consumers than those from the poorer classes. These audiences had more disposable income and could pay more for a prestige product; and so these audiences also offered exhibitors a larger profit margin. However, the middle classes were not imagined as a collection of individuals but as “the ideal family trade,” and, to attract these families, exhibitors focused on “the ‘New American Woman’ and her children.” By attracting middle class women and children, exhibitors acquired “a stamp of respectability that could (and did) lead to more money and a favourable image in the community” (Gomery 1992, 31). Furthermore, when it came to the consumption of cultural goods, women were understood as being the key decision makers in the middle class home—they decided what cultural products should (and should not) be consumed by the family—so that the targeting of middle class women was understood as a way of targeting the family as a whole.

To explore the status that horror films enjoyed during the silent and early sound period, the following article analyses reviews, but these reviews are not only a tool for studying perceptions of respectability, they are also a

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<sup>3</sup> For some time, as Wood illustrates, male scholars often promoted a masculine version of the horror film, so that, even when feminist scholars began to examine the genre in the 1980s and 1990s, their arguments often reproduced the idea that horror is a masculine genre (see for example, Creed 1993; Doane 1987; Williams 1984; and even Clover 1993). Since then various accounts have taken issue with this characterization of the genre (see for example, Berenstein 1996; Cherry 1999; Snelson 2015). However, the idea of horror as a masculine genre is still recycled today (see, for example, Faramond 2020).

sign of respectability. To put it another way, reviews did not really appear, even in the trade press, until 1907, when *Moving Picture World* started production (*Variety* began to publish film reviews soon after in 1908). Moreover, reviews in the mainstream press did not start until much later. For example, the *New York Times* would become one of the most respected and influential publications in terms of film reviews (Klinger 1994), but it did not start reviewing films until 1913, and it only reviewed films on a regular basis from the late 1910s.

Accordingly, the main focus of this essay will be on the 1920s and early 1930s, when film had reached a sufficient level of respectability for reviews to be prevalent; and it will *focus* on two publications. Given its status, the *New York Times* is a good indicator of cultural respectability, while *Variety* gives a strong sense of how the industry understood these materials and their audiences. The point here is not to suggest that all publications or audiences read texts in the same way or made the same judgements about them—which they clearly didn’t—but rather that, as Barbara Klinger puts it, film reviews can be read as “types of social discourse which ... can aid the researcher in ascertaining the material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments” (1994, 69).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, specific cultural judgements are always negotiated: they are asserted in anticipation of other evaluations and so reveal how the reviewer imagines the structure of oppositions between cultural judgements. Each reviewer is clearly aware of estimations of cultural value that they consider to be “beneath” them, and others that they consider to be “above” them—too joyless, pretentious or condescending. Consequently, specific judgements of cultural value give a clue to the shape of the broader cultural field within which they are made.

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Donald Crafton has taken issue with reception studies on the grounds that it does not tell us “about who was watching” a specific film and that reviewers are not “representative of other viewers” (Crafton 1996, 460). In response, we would stress that neither Klinger nor ourselves use reviews to determine the composition of the audience, nor are we taking the “interpretations of a few [reviewers as] the index of the film’s general reception” (460). First, we are not primarily concerned with the reception of *individual* films but rather with identifying larger patterns of reception within specific historical periods. Second, we dispute that there is ever a “general reception”: most reception studies start out from the *differences* in reception and seek to understand the *meanings* of those differences, i.e. the complex causes and effects of those differences. But this also means that, while there is no “general reception,” reception is not simply “uniquely determined by personal opinions and idiosyncratic concerns” as Crafton claims (1996, 461). Instead, as Klinger puts it, reception studies is concerned with “the material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments” (1994, 69). Finally, we would note that when Crafton actually engages with press coverage, he does not even examine reviews. Instead, he takes issue with press accounts of *The Jazz Singer* that were written several years after its initial 1927 release and which misrepresent its original reception. Certainly, this study demonstrates that these sources do not give an accurate account of the film’s reception, but this does not invalidate the method of studying reception that we have undertaken.

While we focus on the *New York Times* and *Variety*, we analyse these publications in the context of others from the period, particularly *Exhibitors Herald*, *Film Daily*, *Harrison's Reports*, *Motion Picture News*, *Moving Pictures World*, *Photoplay*, *Picturegoer*, and *Picture-Play*. However, some sense of focus is necessary: no account can be fully comprehensive and, even if it could, our interest is not simply in detailing the *fact* of differences in interpretation (or evaluation) but of examining “the meanings of difference” (Ang 1989, 107). For example, while many reviews valued the genre highly, these judgements were often presented as reactions against those of other groups, who viewed the genre as a problem in need of censorship. There were even reviewers who sided with those campaigning for censorship, although (as we will see) these reviewers clearly presented themselves as dissenting voices who challenged the general trend among reviewers.

To this end, the essay will be divided into three sections. The first examines the high regard with which individual horror films were judged, but also demonstrates that the genre as a whole enjoyed considerable cultural status. The second section then explores these issues further, through an account of the top stars (or would-be stars) who were attached to the genre in order to develop their careers in positive ways. The third and final section focuses more closely on the genre's relationship to female audiences, particularly in relation to the new codes of sexual behaviour in the period and to the pleasures and the dangers that were supposed to be associated with these new codes.

### **“The Finest Exemplifications of Screen Artistry”: Horror, Art and Cultural Status**

While some silent horror films were clearly seen as disreputable, many were actually high profile productions associated with the prestige of both literature and the theatre. Many even made it into the *New York Times*' annual roundup of the top films, with its list of “Best Films of 1920” featuring “that gruesome work ‘Behind the Door’” (1920), and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920), in which John Barrymore was claimed to have given “one of the finest performances of the year” (Anon. 1921a, 4). The following year, both *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *The Golem* (1920) were identified as being among the top fifteen “most important photoplays” (Anon. 1922a, 2), while in 1922, a much longer list was provided that included *Jane Eyre* (1922) and *The Phantom Carriage* (which was known in the US at the time as *The Stroke of Midnight*, 1921) (Anon. 1922c, 3). The top films of 1923 were supposed to include *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *Trilby* (1923) (Anon. 1923d, 4); while the “ten outstanding pictures” of 1924 included *He Who Gets Slapped*

(1924), which was explicitly declared to be a “masterpiece” (Hall 1925a, 5). In 1925, the list changed to include the best films of the previous *two* years and featured both *He Who Gets Slapped* and *The Unholy Three* (1925), while both F. W. Murnau and Browning were identified in a list of top directors (Hall 1926a, 5). By 1926, however, these numbers fell significantly and the genre seems to have subtly changed in status. If horror was still associated with prestige productions in the late 1920s, there was also a huge increase in production so that horror no longer enjoyed the rarity and distinction of the early 1920s. Nonetheless, although neither Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) nor Victor Sjöström’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) were straight-forwardly horror films, both were given special mention in 1926 (Hall 1927a, 7) and, in the following year, both *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and *Metropolis* (1927) achieved the same distinction (Hall 1928a, 6). *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) also got special mention in 1928, when both Murnau and Leni were identified as key directors (Hall 1929, 4).

The film reviews also indicate the high regard with which critics viewed both specific films and the genre as a whole, whether or not those films made it into the top films of their year. For example, *Behind the Door* was said to be “decidedly one of the best made pictures produced since before the beginning of the war” (Anon. 1920a, 15), and while some reviewers objected to aspects of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, it was still regarded as “high up there among screen accomplishments” (Anon. 1920b, 18). *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, however, was a completely different case: “Few motion pictures have excited more interest, advance or accompanying, than the latest German production to reach this country,” and its central importance was due to its visual style in which “space had been ‘given a voice,’ and had ‘become a presence’” (Anon. 1921b, 2). *The Golem* was also praised as one in which its director, Paul Wegener, “has shown his greatest artistry” and in which the film’s “power is derived mainly from a combination of exceptional acting and the most expressive settings yet seen in this country” (Anon. 1921c, 17). *The Phantom Carriage* was also praised, and its makers were clearly distinguished from “ninety-nine out of a hundred producing companies you can think of” given that they were claimed to have demonstrated an “imagination” that was in stark contrast to the “literal-mindedness” of many other filmmakers (Anon. 1922b, 16).

American horror productions also received praise. For example, *Trilby* was claimed to be “far ahead of most productions presented on Broadway” (Anon. 1923d, 4), while *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was noted to have “attracted unusual interest” and to be distinguished by Chaney, who “hopes that his performance” will not just be outstanding but “a contribution to the art of the motion pictures” (Anon. 1923c, 2). The sets were also highly regarded and the overall judgement was that *Hunchback* was



a film that “will appeal to all those who are interested in fine screen acting, artistic settings and a remarkable handling of crowds who don’t mind a grotesque figure and a grim atmosphere” (Anon. 1923e, 9). As we have seen, *He Who Gets Slapped* was claimed to be a “masterpiece”, while *The Unholy Three* was described as “a startlingly original achievement that takes its place with the very best productions that have been made. It is encouraging to witness something so different from the usual run of films” (Hall 1925b, 14). *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) received fewer plaudits but it was still “an ambitious production in which there is much to marvel at in the scenic effects” (Hall 1925c, 15). Reviewers also celebrated Chaney’s performance in the film, while his acting in *The Blackbird* (1926) was even described as “one of the finest exemplifications of screen artistry one would hope to behold” (Hall 1926b, 16). Finally, *The Magician* (1926) was praised for Rex Ingram’s “excellent work” as its director, and its villain was commended for his similarity to figures such as “Svengali and that other shadow character, Dr. Caligari” (Hall 1926c, 15).

As we have seen, *Faust* was considered to be a film of special significance, which not only featured a “masterful performance” by Emil Jannings but was “as far removed from the ordinary movie as a Tintoretto painting” (Hall 1926f, 21). Like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Metropolis* provoked ambivalent responses: while the *New York Times* declared that it “stands alone, in some respects, as a remarkable technical achievement,” it was also claimed to be a “technical marvel” that was “as soulless as the manufactured women of its story” (Hall 1927b, 16). In contrast, *The Cat and the Canary* may not have made the end of year list but it was praised as one of “the finest examples of motion picture art” (Hall 1927c, 9). If *The Phantom* and *Metropolis* were technical marvels that were undermined by their baser materials, *The Cat and the Canary* was, conversely, “the first time that a mystery melodrama had been lifted into the realms of art” (Hall 1927c, 9). This was then followed by Leni’s next film, *The Chinese Parrot* (1927), which was claimed to be “a worthy successor” and demonstrated that the director was “a master of camera technique” (Anon. 1928, 28). *Dracula* didn’t quite get this level of praise but it could “at least boast of being the best of many mystery films” (Hall 1931a, 21), although even *Dracula* seemed “tame” beside *Frankenstein*, which was “the most effective thing of its kind” and more than a technical success, or a crowd pleaser. On the contrary, it was an “artistically conceived work,” regardless of “what one may say about the melodramatic ideas here” (Hall 1931b, 21).

While these reviews clearly distinguished their own judgements from those of the industry, and of the paying public, the horror films they cover were not low-budget efforts discovered by the discerning critic. On the contrary, as should be clear, these films attracted top directors, and not

simply as a stepping stone to more prestigious productions.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, some merely made specific contributions but then moved on once they had established their status as directors. For example, Sjöström made his name in the US with *The Phantom Carriage* but moved to productions which were less explicitly identified as horror—*Tower of Lies* (1925), *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Wind* (1928)—although even as late as *The Scarlet Letter*, critics noted its association with horror and observed that its villain displayed “a beard and expression mindful of Svengali” (Hall<sup>d</sup> 1926, 19). Conversely, other directors (such as Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang) continued to work within the area for the rest of their career. Leni and Benjamin Christensen were also seen as specialists in the field, and while the latter was sometimes derided as a maker of melodramatic nonsense, Leni was clearly understood as one of the key directors of the 1920s, being the director “of that memorable German subject, ‘The Three Waxworks,’ and the designer of the settings for ‘Variety’” (Hall 1927c, 9). However, Leni’s status was not only due to his work at UFA, as he was also celebrated for his contribution to Hollywood. *The Cat and the Canary* was claimed to feature “scenes ... that are amazing” (Hall 1927c, 9), while *The Chinese Parrot* “once more proves that with individual treatment an only fair-to-middling story can be made into a film that is at once original and imaginative” (Anon. 1928, 28). He was also claimed to be “expert” in his “handling” of *The Man Who Laughs*, “for he revels in lights and shadows, and takes advantage of the full details” of its hideous protagonist (Hall 1928b, 12). Even *The Last Warning* (1928) featured “some finely directed passages” and sequences in which Leni “revels in some dissolves and camera angles,” although the film was seen as an inferior work given that “other scenes don’t appear to interest him nearly so much” (Anon. 1929, 36). In fact, as Christensen, Carl Dreyer, Lang, Leni, Sjöström, and Wiene all demonstrate, many of the most prestigious US imports from the European cinema during the 1920s were associated with the horror genre.

Nonetheless, the genre was not simply limited to the Europeans and many of the top Hollywood directors made contributions. Of course, Tod Browning was a key director who has long been seen as a key figure in the horror film, largely through his association with Lon Chaney (although he went on to have a strong association with the genre after Chaney’s death and made various films such as the Universal *Dracula* and a virtual remake of *London After Midnight* [1927], *Mark of the Vampire* [1935]). Roland West was another key director who was strongly associated with the genre and, in 1918, the *New York Times* ran a feature on him, where it discussed how he

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Tod Browning, Benjamin Christensen, Nick Grinde, Cecil B. De Mille, Maurice Elvey, D. W. Griffith, Alfred Hitchcock, Rex Ingram, Henry King, Fritz Lang, Rowland V. Lee, Paul Leni, Rouben Mamoulian, F. W. Murnau, Fred Niblo, Victor Sjöström, Maurice Tourneur, Roland West and James Whale.

had made his name in theatre before directing *De Luxe Annie* (1918) for Norma Talmadge. This film featured a heroine with a dual personality and was likened to *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by critics (Jancovich and Brown 2022), while the *New York Times* described it as “one of the greatest screen money makers of recent years” (Anon. 1918, 2). After this, West made other horror films such as *The Unknown Purple* (1923), Lon Chaney’s *The Monster* (1925), and the film version of the hit horror stage play, *The Bat* (1926). This play was the model for numerous other horror plays, which would in turn become the basis for films later in the 1920s.

Other top directors had a less obvious relation to horror, but their association with the genre still demonstrates the status of horror. In some cases, these projects were chosen by the director and, in others, the choice was made by the studio; but in neither case would the decision have been made if the genre had been seen as a waste of their talents or one that might threaten their reputations. Nonetheless, George Melford directed a number of horror films, such as *The Sea Wolf* (1920), *The Charlatan* (1929) and, most significantly, the Spanish language *Dracula* (1931), which Universal filmed at the same time as Tod Browning’s version of the story. Cecil B. DeMille made both *The Ghost Breaker* (1914) and *The Devil-Stone* (1917), the latter being “a drama of weird fascination” that De Mille promoted as a warning against that “world-old stumbling block of man—superstition” (“Devil Stone Pressbook” 1917, 3). Griffith made *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), *One Exciting Night* (1922) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926). Also, while critics were clear that *One Exciting Night* was not one of Griffith’s most prestigious efforts, they also stressed that it “is probably the best of his ‘low-brow’ pictures” (Anon. 1922e, 2). Even Rex Ingram contributed to the genre with *The Magician*, a film in which his “expert direction rather overshadows the fantastic narrative” (Hall 1926c, 15). Nor was the film read as an aberration for Ingram but simply as a project that was distinguished by his “brilliant work” (Hall 1926c, 15).

### **“A Marvellous Depiction of Bestiality”: Stars, Performances and Horror**

Unsurprisingly, then, these films attracted many top stars and, of the four male stars of the period that Gaylyn Studlar analyses in *The Mad Masquerade* (2005), only Douglas Fairbanks seems to have no association with horror. For example, despite Studlar’s claim that Lon Chaney’s films were not “horror movies” but “straight melodramas that were classified by reviewers as ‘suspense shockers,’ ‘thrillers,’ ‘mysteries,’ or ‘mystery-melodramas’” (2005, 205), Chaney was clearly viewed as a horror star. Many of the terms

that Studlar mentions were closely associated with horror at the time, and often interchangeable with it (Jancovich and Brown 2022), and many of Chaney's key roles were in films that were explicitly identified as horror at the time. For example, *A Blind Bargain* (1922) was described as: "Another addition to the 'horror' situation so prevalent in fiction, theatre and on the screen for the past year" (Skig. 1922, 33). Similarly, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was condemned by *Variety* precisely because they argued that Universal had made a "mistake" by producing this big-budget horror film. It was therefore referred to as "a two-hour nightmare. It's murderous, hideous and repulsive" (Sime. 1923, 22). It was also described as "morbid", "gruesome" and "gory" (Sime. 1923, 22). *The Monster* was also clearly seen as a horror film about a "terrifying" mad doctor, even if *Variety* complained (on this occasion) that "Chaney does not make the crazed surgeon as terrifying a picture as he might have, and in that the film lets down to a certain extent" (Fred. 1925, 41). Finally, *The Phantom of the Opera* was another case that was clearly identified as "another horror" from Universal Pictures, which was "probably the greatest inducement to nightmares that has yet been screened" (Skig. 1925, 35). It was even doubted whether, following *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Chaney would ever be able to "erase the impression of these two makeups" and so escape an association with horror; while it believed that "Universal is evidently out to establish itself as the champ ghost story telling firm" (Skig. 1925, 35).

However, as Rick Altman has pointed out, although some films may have been explicitly identified as horror, the "naming of a genre" is actually quite rare and a sense of generic affiliation is usually conveyed through a series of associated terms (Altman 1999, 128). Horror films, for example, are often suggested through terms such as morbid, nightmarish, gruesome, gory, terrifying, eerie and weird. This strategy can be seen in other reviews of Chaney's films, such as *The Unholy Three*, which was described as "a crook melodrama" but also as one that was distinguished by an "exceptionally weird and dramatic atmosphere" (Anon. 1930b, 12). Elsewhere it was also claimed to be distinguished by its "increasing overtone of horror" (Anon. 1930a, 17). If these qualities added value to *The Unholy Three*, *Mr. Wu* (1927) was criticised (like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*) for being "too gruesome" (Ung 1927), while *The Unknown* was seen as a disappointment *despite* being "ghastly" and "gruesome" (Sid. 1927, 20). Alternatively, *The Blackbird* was associated with horror through the claim that it had "a streak of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (Hall 1926b, 16).

Also, while Studlar argues that an association with the freak show was central to Chaney's stardom, this association also directly associated his films with horror through the grotesque and weird; and even on the rare occasion that his characters were not disfigured, they were often figures such as

clowns and magicians, who were associated with the weird and uncanny through their use of masks, illusions and disguises. Even in cases such as *While the City Sleeps* (1928), where Chaney is simply cast as a detective, the action is set in a location designed to evoke the weird, eerie and uncanny: “Mr. Younger has thought up the idea of having a number of the scenes take place in a funeral parlor and of having the crooks hide their loot in a coffin. In order to get information on the band, Mr. Chaney, this time as an indomitable sleuth, hides in one of the coffins” (Hall 1928c, 29). Similarly, *While Paris Sleeps* (1923) is described as a “weird” story that involves “a half demented manager of a wax works” (Fred. 1923, 46) and *London After Midnight* is a “murder mystery” in which Chaney’s detective solves a murder with hypnotism and illusion, which he uses to create “an atmosphere of mystery” and to suggest the presence of “unearthly characters,” such as ghosts and vampires (Mori 1927, 18). Indeed, as discussed earlier, the distinction between horror and detective fiction was not yet in operation in the 1920s; and, as the reviews above suggest, Chaney’s association with horror meant that his presence often tinged his films in particular ways, and transformed the ways in which they were read. As one article put it: “In each and every picture, the unmistakable menace of Chaney will be there—the nightmare shocks—the lurking, nameless terror that grips the heart, and makes each separate hair to stand on end” (Ussher 1927, 30).

Even John Barrymore, whom Studlar discusses as a matinee idol, repeatedly returned to horror productions throughout the period. Although he was already a star in the theatre, his breakthrough role in the cinema was in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a film that clearly worked through “the contrast between” his dual roles as “the philanthropic and high-minded physician and the fiendish ‘Mr Hyde’” (Jolo. 1920, 93). If the first role clearly conformed to his reputation as a matinee idol, the second role did not depart from his image but was clearly meant to suggest another side to it, a shadow or double of the matinee idol. As the *Variety* review put it, Hyde is “a marvellous depiction of bestiality” but, whether Barrymore is playing Jekyll or Hyde, he “is always Jack Barrymore” (Jolo. 1920, 93).

Hyde was therefore crucial to Barrymore for a various reasons. It allowed him to add complexity and ambiguity to his more “high-minded” roles while also allowing him to demonstrate his abilities as a celebrated theatrical actor. In fact, *Variety* observed that this dual role was the type of role “a star revels in” (Jolo. 1920, 93), and, at the same time that Barrymore was appearing as Jekyll and Hyde in the cinema, he was playing another role on the Broadway stage, one that was far closer to Hyde than to Jekyll—Shakespeare’s notorious villain, Richard the Third. In this play, Richard’s villainy is even written on his body and these physical deformities,

particularly his hunchback, not only echo those of Mr. Hyde but also the roles for which Chaney became famous.

Barrymore is also doubled with another hideous villain in the film version of *Sherlock Holmes* (1922), although in this case his double, Moriarty, is played by another actor. The importance of Moriarty is also carried by the title of the film, when it was released as *Moriarty*, rather than as *Sherlock Holmes*, in the United Kingdom. As has been pointed out elsewhere, the Holmes films of this period were also explicitly described as, or strongly associated with, horror (Jancovich and Brown 2022), and Barrymore followed *Sherlock Holmes* with yet another horror film with literary associations. *The Sea Beast* (1925) was an adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) in which Barrymore is once again confronted by a double, although in this case his double is a "villainous half-brother" (Sime. 1926, 41). Here, however, it is Barrymore's Ahab who is the physically monstrous character, and most reviews see the film as revolving around a scene of torture after Ahab loses his leg to the whale: "Barrymore's expression of suffering while having a tourniquet tied to his severed limb, and more so as they applied an antiseptic blazing iron to the raw flesh, are comparable to nothing that has been seen in a moving picture. While Mr. Barrymore's entire performance here, from method to make up is worth a serious study" (Sime. 1926, 41). Barrymore even remade *The Sea Beast* in 1930, although the latter version reverted to the novel's original title, *Moby Dick*.

Then, in 1931, Barrymore made another horror film, *Svengali*, in which he appeared as another famously hideous and villainous character from literature and one that explicitly played on an idea that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* had also suggested: that the female audience might actually be attracted by the hideous and the villainous. The film is therefore seen as depending on "the fascination of Svengali for women," even if some critics had "doubts" that "the young will go for it" (Sid. 1931, 22). Despite these doubts, Barrymore quickly followed *Svengali* with *The Mad Genius* (1931), another horror film in which he played a mesmerizing and controlling figure. Again, this was seen as a "magnificent piece of acting" but *Variety* was doubtful whether it would appeal to his core (female) audience and dismissed it as a vanity project, in which Barrymore "has a much better time" in the role "than the audience has in watching" it (Rush. 1931b, 19). Interestingly, although the role explicitly played on the monstrous but fascinating features of Svengali, its failure was clearly identified with the absence of that which was often seen as central to Chaney's monstrous characters: the primary character was claimed to be "too remote ... to engage sympathetic interest" (Rush. 1931b, 19).

The last horror-related films associated with John Barrymore are interesting due to the ways in which they return to the strategy of *Sherlock*

*Holmes* and contrast John Barrymore's heroic and/or romantic lead with a double that was played by another actor: in these cases, his brother, Lionel. For example, *Arsene Lupin* (1932) features John as the "glamorous Lupin," a role that actually works to his disadvantage: "although John has a monopoly on the romantic interest throughout, Lionel gets the acting punch" (Rush. 1932, 20). Similarly, in *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932), it is claimed that "John is always at a disadvantage when Lionel is on the same celluloid," given that Lionel's villains leave John "totally eclipsed" (Abel. 1932, 14). Furthermore, the horror associations are clear in the description of Lionel's performance as Rasputin, which give the character "a little of the old Svengali-Frankenstein treatment" so that the film "gives out a little Frankie-Dracula stuff" (Abel. 1932, 14).

Like his brother, Lionel also was a prestigious actor and enjoyed a long association with horror. In the cinema, he starred in *The Bells* (1926) before moving on to films like *The Thirteenth Hour* (1927), of which the *New York Times* claimed that "it seems as though Lionel Barrymore had decided to invade Lon Chaney's thrilling realms" (Hall 1927d, 18), while *Variety* noted that "he adopts a grim expression and a stoop to conform to the standard conception of an old and cagey rascal who takes any means to gain his end" (Waly. 1930b, 30). *Variety* also dismissed the film as "unadulterated melodrama" and claimed that "Barrymore probably snickers to himself over these roles," the implication being that he not only enjoyed playing this type of role but that he was frequently drawn to it, too. Elsewhere, when Lionel Barrymore directed *The Unholy Night* (1929), the title was seen as an attempt to "capitalise" on "a successful Chaney picture," *The Unholy Three* (Waly. 1929b, 33); and in *West of Zanzibar* (1928), he even appeared opposite Chaney with Barrymore playing the villain and Chaney playing his revengeful victim. Lionel Barrymore would also appear in *Mark of the Vampire*, which is often seen as a remake of Chaney's *London After Midnight*; and in *The Devil Doll* (1936), of which *Variety* observed that the big moment was "a remake by Tod Browning of the scene which highlighted his 'Unholy Three' some years ago" (Bige. 1936, 18). In this film, Barrymore masquerades as an "old lady," a performance that was claimed to be "reminiscent of Chaney's" performance in *The Unholy Three*. Again, then, this role was hardly one that Barrymore saw as being beneath him but, on the contrary, it was claimed that "the leading part is a field day" for him (Bige. 1936, 18).

As should be clear, then, it was not simply that horror films were able to gain respectability through the use of major stars but that major stars could enhance their reputations through horror. Chaney's ability to play grotesque figures was crucial to his reputation as an actor who was not only able to transform himself but virtually erase himself through performance (see, for example, Gebhart 1923) while John Barrymore's horror

performances also stressed his acting credentials rather than his reputation as a matinee idol of extreme beauty. However, the relationship between horror and beauty also worked another way so that even Rudolph Valentino was associated with the genre. As Studlar (2005) notes, his appeal was founded on his supposedly alluring but dangerous sexuality, and, as David Skal (1990) has argued, Lugosi's *Dracula* drew upon its frisson (Skal 1990, 85). It is therefore hardly surprising that, as we have seen, Universal's Spanish language *Dracula* was directed by George Melford, who was "perhaps best remembered as the director of Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik*" (1921) (Skal 1990,160).

Nor was it only male stars who were associated with the genre. As we have seen, the period was one in which the prestige pictures were usually associated with female audiences, given that women were seen as the key cultural decision makers in middle class families. Consequently, this period was one in which many of the top stars were female, and the status of the horror film was demonstrated by the way in which many key female stars were associated with the genre. For example, Mary Philbin was already a star when she appeared in *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Man Who Laughs*. She had previously worked with both Erich von Stroheim and D. W. Griffith, and was briefly seen as being on the same level as Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh and Mary Pickford. Alice Terry was an even bigger star when she made *The Magician*: she and her husband, Rex Ingram, were "one of the most celebrated director-actress teams of the 1920s" (Kenaga 2013, n.p.), a period in which they made twelve films together, including one of the biggest successes of the decade, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921).

Similarly, when Norma Talmadge starred in *De Luxe Annie*, she had already "climbed to the absolute top of motion pictures" and had established her own film company, *De Luxe Annie* being a production from this company (Basinger 2012, 146). Constance Binney was "one of Paramount's top stars" at the time that she was cast in *The Case of Becky* (1921) (Slide 2002, 23); and Mae Busch was "one of the screen's leading actresses" (Anon. 1946, 21) when she starred alongside Chaney in *The Unholy Three*, a film that was hardly seen as a comedown for her. As *Variety*'s review put it: "Well, Mae has just gone out and done it, an' how? It is certainly a far cry from Mae at the old St. Francis on 47th Street ... but Mae was a great little gal then and she is certainly a great little actress now. This picture more than proves it" (Fred. 1925, 30). Similarly, when Renee Adoree appeared with Chaney in *The Blackbird*, the *Variety* review explicitly stressed her status as a major star who had "smashed it through to glory in 'The Big Parade'" (Sirk. 1926, 37). Nor was this film the last time that the two would appear together: Adoree was also cast alongside Chaney in *Mr. Wu*, for which she was praised both for her performance and for having "that sensuous appeal which always clicks"



(Ung 1927, 17). Indeed, as Anthony Slide notes, she was “promoted as a major screen beauty” (2002, 167). In the 1920s, Laura La Plante was one of Universal’s biggest stars, and “well on her way to becoming one of the most famous women in America” when she starred in *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Last Warning* (Thomas 1996, 14). Leila Hyams (*The Wizard*, 1927; *The Thirteenth Chair*, *The Phantom of Paris*, 1931; *Freaks*, 1932; and *Island of Lost Souls*, 1932) was described by the *New York Times* as the “‘Golden Girl’ of Movies in the 20’s and 30’s,” when she was famous for her “perfect pink, white and blond colouring” and “her wholesome charm” (Fraser 1977, 82). Alternatively, Lila Lee (*The Ghost Breaker*, 1922; *The Unholy Three*, 1930; *The Gorilla*, 1930; and *Murder Will Out*, 1930) was being developed by Paramount, during the 1920s, as a replacement for Gloria Swanson, a period in which she “won enormous popularity as the romantic companion on the screen of some of the most worshipped film stars of the era” (Anon. 1973, 48). She even starred with Valentino in *Blood and Sand* (1922) in the same year that she appeared in *The Ghost Breaker*. If her status was in decline during the late 1920s, she still made a successful transition into the sound era, with both *The Unholy Three* and *The Gorilla* being sound remakes of hits from earlier in the 1920s (1925 and 1927 respectively). Even Mary Pickford starred in a horror film, *Sparrows* (1925); and while this was after her career had reached its zenith, she was still a major star. Indeed, *Variety* disapproved of the film and described it as “one of the few duds put out by Pickford,” although it also conceded that her star power was so strong that her “name is more or less failure-proof” (Rush. 1926, 14).

Other female stars *built* their stardom on horror roles. Norma Shearer, for example, appeared in *He Who Gets Slapped*, *The Devil’s Circus* (1926) and *Tower of Lies*, the first of which made her into one of MGM’s biggest stars. Similarly, Joan Crawford made her breakthrough to top star status in Lon Chaney’s *The Unknown* (1927), while Martha Mansfield’s casting in Barrymore’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* also led to stardom: the film had much the same impact on Nita Naldi’s career, too. In contrast, the *Variety* review of Barrymore’s *Svengali* claimed that Barrymore is so impressive in the role that the audience “won’t go away remembering much of anybody else”: “Which isn’t the particular reaction desired as regards Marion Marsh whom Warners would like to build up, with the studio picking this picture as a choice launching point” (Sid. 1931, 22). In other words, this horror film had been chosen as a vehicle to enhance her career, even if the plan had failed for other reasons. Conversely, Jean Arthur’s career was launched through her roles in the Fu Manchu and Philo Vance films of the late 1920s and early 1930s; and Andree Layfayette was expected to achieve stardom through her appearance in *Trilby*, a role for which the studio imported her from France where, they claimed, that she was that nation’s most beautiful woman.

Many of these horror films not only featured female stars but offered female-centred narratives, too. In other words, these films were part of a long tradition of female-centred horror stories that goes back to the Gothic novel, a prominent feature of which was the investigating female who must struggle to uncover the secret histories of her mysterious social world (Ellis 1989). For example, *The Haunted Bedroom* (1919) centres on a “young newspaper girl” who investigates a supposedly haunted mansion and “clears up the mystery” (Anon. 1919, 45), while *The Bat* features a more elderly female investigator, Cornelia Van Gorder, who not only solves the mystery but “has the last word” at the end (Hall 1926c, 18).

Consequently, female stars often received top billing in the credits, such as: Norma Talmadge in *De Luxe Annie*, Enid Bennett in *The Haunted Bedroom*, Constance Binney in *The Case of Becky*, Carol Dempster in *One Exciting Night*, Mabel Ballin in *Jane Eyre*, Andree Lafayette in *Trilby*, Aileen Pringle in *The Mystic* (1925), Mary Pickford in *Sparrows*, Emily Fitzroy in *The Bat*, Alice Terry in *The Magician*, Laura La Plante in *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Last Warning*, Marian Nixon in *The Chinese Parrot*, and Helen Twelvetrees in *The Cat Creeps* (1930).

Many films were also based on novels or plays by female authors, or featured screenplays by women: *The Devil-Stone* (screenplay by Beatrice De Mille and Jeanie Macpherson); *Something Always Happens* (1928, adaptation and screenplay by Florence Ryerson); *Frankenstein* (based on a play by Peggy Webling, which was itself an adaptation from Mary Shelley); *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1929, screenplay co-written by Florence Ryerson); *Go Get It* (1920, screenplay by Marion Fairfax); *The Case of Becky* (1915, co-written by Margaret Turnbull); *Jane Eyre* (novel by Charlotte Bronte); *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (scenario by Clara S. Beranger); *The Bat* (based on a play co-written by Mary Roberts Rinehart, a play that was based on her novel, *The Circular Staircase*); *The Bishop Murder Case* (1929, Adaptation and Screenplay by Lenore Coffee); and *The Lodger* (1927, adapted from a novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes). Griffith even chose to mask his own name with a female one (Irene Sinclair) in the scriptwriting credits for *One Exciting Night*, presumably because this film (along with a number of other plays and films) was an explicit imitation of Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *The Bat*. As one publication put it: “For sheer blood-curdling inventiveness, it is going to snatch a lot of royalties away from Avery Hopwood and Mary Roberts Rinehart [the authors of *The Bat*] and put them back into the film industry” (Anon. 1922d, 4).

### **“Feminine Fans Seem to Get Some Sort of Emotional Kick Out of This”: Horror and the Female Audience**

It should hardly be surprising, then, that these films were not primarily associated with male audiences, as is often claimed of horror films (Creed 1993; Clover 1993; Doane 1987; Williams 1984). On the contrary, there was a strong sense that, in general, the horror films of the silent and early sound periods were, if anything, targeted at women. When gender preferences are mentioned, it is usually in relation to the positive relationships between horror films and female audiences. For example, while *Variety*'s review of *Dracula* addressed concerns about how female audiences would respond to the film, it was also clear that the film's success was seen as *dependent* on female audiences: “Here was a picture whose screen fortunes must have caused much uncertainty as to the femme fan reaction. As it turns out all the signs are that the woman angle is favourable and that sets the picture for better than average money at the box office” (Rush. 1931a, 14).

By the release of *Frankenstein*, this association was even more explicit and *Variety* considered horror films to have an appeal specifically for women: “Feminine fans seem to get some sort of emotional kick out of this simulation of the bedtime ghost story done with all the literalness of the camera” (Rush. 1931c, 14). Similarly, an article on the boom in horror in the late 1920s interviewed crime writer S. S. Van Dine (the creator of Philo Vance) and quoted him as follows: “People ... get bloodier minded all the time. They used to be content with one really satisfying murder, but now they want two or three to the book. Even the nicest old ladies seem to enjoy wallowing in gore” (Van Dine, quoted in Donnell 1928). As a specialist in this kind of fiction, Van Dine is largely performing mock outrage here, but he also sees the female audience as being crucial. Certainly, women are not seen as the *sole* audience for these stories but “the nicest old ladies” are still used as a *crucial* audience that simultaneously represents *a* core audience *and* demonstrates the *reach* of these stories. Indeed, by the 1940s, Raymond Chandler was claiming (not entirely unproblematically) that mystery was largely a genre *for* old ladies, and that only the hard boiled novels were masculine enough to gain his approval. He therefore expresses disgust at the idea that “old ladies jostle each other at the mystery shelf to grab off some item of the same vintage with a title like *The Triple Murder Case, or Inspector Pinchbottle to the Rescue*” (Chandler 1980, 174). He also condemns those who criticised hard-boiled fiction, and dismisses them as “the flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages—who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms” (Chandler 1980, 188).

Alternatively, Mary Anne Doane (borrowing from Linda Williams) claims that women close their eyes when confronted by cinematic horrors

and that this response is a refusal of the image. She therefore likens this refusal to male responses to the “love story”: “the sign of maturity in the little boy, when confronted by the ‘love story,’ is the fact that he looks away” (Doane 1987, 96). Looking away is therefore read as a male rejection of a feminine genre (the love story) or a feminine rejection of a masculine genre (the horror film). However, during the silent and early sound period, film reviews clearly regarded “feminine” responses to horror as the *appropriate* responses, responses that demonstrated the effectiveness of a horror film, *not* a rejection of it. For example, the *New York Times* regarded it as being positive endorsement of the film that, during one screening of *The Phantom of the Opera*, “a woman behind us stifled a scream” (Hall 1925c, 15). Similarly, a review of *The Bishop Murder Case* confirmed that the filmmakers had “imbued it with the necessary atmosphere” so much so that “some of the female contingent of the audience ... were impelled to scream” (Hall 1930, 15).

Of course, this replicates ideas that women are more easily frightened than men, but it can also be read, as Rhona Berenstein (1996) has demonstrated, as playing with gendered identities in more complex ways. In other words, it still implies that male readers will be attracted by the promise that an effective horror film will frighten them, even if it simultaneously acts to console them that they will be *less* susceptible. In other words, these comments still entice the male viewer with the promise of sharing the pleasures of this fear, even as he might want to *perform* his insensitivity to it.

However, these screams were also associated with the female audience in another way. These films were associated with a thrill that was not only explicitly visceral but also linked to sexuality in various ways. For example, the casting of John Barrymore (and later Fredric March) in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was clearly an appeal to the female audience, given his reputation as a romantic lead. Yet this romantic appeal was not simply associated with handsome Dr. Jekyll, but also monstrous Mr. Hyde. Writing of the Sheldon Lewis production (released in the US in the same year as the Barrymore version), one reviewer explicitly stated that Sheldon Lewis was “a less sensual and less ferocious Mr. Hyde than the Barrymore exhibit” (Anon. 1920c, 107). Barrymore’s Mr. Hyde may have been monstrous and corrupting but he still promised a sexual thrill, a promise that, like many versions of *Dracula*, made him both repulsive *and* attractive.

As Studlar notes, Valentino’s appeal was also bound up with these issues: his physical beauty was associated with ethnicities that were taboo at the time. He was therefore associated with the pleasure and dangers of the “tango pirates and lounge lizards” of the jazz age, figures that were “stereotyped as immigrant, lower-class Italians and Jews who, it was presumed, had acquired a sufficient veneer of clothes and manners” to

seduce Anglo-Saxon women (Studlar 2005, 163). As Studlar puts it, for many social commentators, these figures (and the new social entertainments with which they were associated) were a “danger to America’s biological future”: “the nation’s dancing, pleasure-mad women were leading the country into ‘race-suicide’” (2005, 152). In this context, a figure such as Valentino evoked both the pleasures and the dangers of these “tango pirates,” and Studlar even describes him as having a “vampish sexual desirability” (2005, 152). It is therefore hardly surprising that Skal stresses the association between Valentino and the Lugosi incarnation of Dracula.

Lon Chaney can also be understood in this context. While Barrymore’s Hyde can be seen as “a eugenicist’s nightmare” (Studlar 2005, 130), Lon Chaney was also supposed to evoke weird, physical responses in his audiences, responses that often had an erotic dimension. In some cases, Chaney’s appeal is conveyed through a metaphor of taste so that he “is characterized by a certain acid quality, a natural salinity, a bitter tang, that sweeps like a cleansing sea wind across the surface of the silver screen, saturated too long with an over-dose of sickly-sweet scenarios” (Ussher 1925, 22). This plays on well-established associations between taste, orality and sexuality (Lupton 2015): after all, *Dracula* literally feeds upon his victims. But elsewhere the bodily thrills that Chaney was supposed to elicit were conveyed even more pointedly. For example, one writer refutes claims that mystery is best conveyed through sound, and that silent film was a poor medium for the mystery story; and they use Chaney as evidence for their refutation: his work “gives lie to this assertion, for he makes such a palpable, menacing reality out of every shadowy movement that no audible ‘atmosphere’ is necessary to bring gasps of horror from the spectators” (Ussher 1925, 23). If Chaney induces “gasps” from the audience here, elsewhere the responses that he elicits are almost explicitly orgasmic: “His new releases clearly accentuate this peculiar quality of Chaney’s appeal. They form a gradual accumulation of horror upon horror; a rising crescendo of crime, culminating in a wild orgy of Black Magic” (Ussher 1927, 30). Although these references do not explicitly gender this spectator, and suggest that such responses would be experienced by *all* viewers, they are strongly suggestive of the feminine through the stereotypical passivity of the response—the body here responds with excitement to Chaney so that his actions manipulate the spectator’s body. Also, as with Valentino, Barrymore’s Hyde and Lugosi’s Dracula, the line between the pleasurable and the horrific is blurred, so that the thrills that Chaney was supposed to elicit suggested a sado-masochistic dynamic that was often associated with heterosexual femininity and male homosexuality at the time (Brown 2016). Reviews at the time even discussed Chaney’s films in terms of the “Beauty

and the Beast” story so that *Mockery* was declared to be a failure because this “beauty and the beast effect is entirely lost” (Abel. 1927, 23).

Despite this potential queering of reception, Studlar quotes various sources that suggest that Chaney was predominantly associated with male audiences at the time, and that women largely rejected his films. However, there are various reasons to question this conclusion. In addition to the observations above, reviewers frequently talked about Chaney’s “fans,”<sup>6</sup> although this was a period in which fandom was largely associated with female audiences. As Anthony Slide notes, the fan magazines “were generally directed at a female readership” (Slide 2010, 4), while Henry Jenkins has discussed the long association between fandom, femininity and pathology (Jenkins 1992). Also, many of the writers of the fan magazines were female, and two of the most explicitly sexualized articles on Chaney mentioned above were published under the byline of Kathleen Ussher. Furthermore, Jenkins also notes that even when fans have been male, they have usually been understood as feminized figures (Jenkins 1992). Fans were fanatics and, in the 1920s, fandom was usually associated with the supposedly irrational, “pleasure-mad women” of the period (Stamp 2000).

Furthermore, while Studlar argues that exhibitors “frequently claimed that Chaney’s films were disliked by women,” her evidence bears closer examination (Studlar 2005, 208-9). In Studlar’s account, the first reference is to an exhibitor who slips between two terms, “sophisticated city audiences” (for whom the film is a “dandy”) and “women” (who “will stay away.”) This slippage does not necessary suggest that Chaney had little appeal to women but that, while he may appeal to women that were part of the “sophisticated city audiences,” he did not play well to women in this exhibitor’s region. The next couple of references suggest that various Chaney films were “liked by *most* of the men and boys,” but this does not mean that they were entirely rejected by women. On the contrary, both exhibitors concede that there were “a few women” who liked them, too; and one even acknowledges that *some* women described *The Blackbird* as “a good picture.” Finally, the last exhibitor that Studlar discusses returns to an earlier point: that Chaney may be popular in the urban centres where, as Gomery points out, Hollywood made most of its profits (Gomery 1992, 60), but that he “is slipping *here*.” It is within this context that this exhibitor addresses

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<sup>6</sup> Consequently, a review of *Mr. Wu* maintained that “Chaney fans” were too discriminating to “rave over” the film (Ung. 1927, 17), while a review of *West of Zanzibar* was rather less positive about these fans and claimed that the film “will satisfy Chaney fans who like their color regardless of the way in which it is daubed.” (Waly 1929a, 11). These negative associations with the term fan, can also be seen elsewhere and, in a review of *The Man Who Laughs*, it was claimed that the film would “appeal to the Lon Chaney mob” (Land. 1928, 14). Not only were fans often depicted as mobs but the term “mob” had long been used in a perjorative sense, in which the mob is imagined as one in which the members have lost both a sense of rationality and individuality.

women's response to Chaney, so that his point seems to be that Chaney may be popular (with both men and women) in the urban centres but that his popularity with the women in his own area *might* be starting to wane: "When women folk *start* to tell you they don't like him, better let him alone."

Elsewhere, as we have already shown, there are numerous articles on Chaney in the fan magazines, which strongly suggested that these publications believed he had a strong appeal to their largely female readership. Even as early as 1923, *Picture-Play* acknowledged this growing fascination in Chaney when it responded to one female fan, who had declared him to be her "favorite actor" (Anon. 1923b, 112). If the magazine found her declaration to be "rather unusual," and claimed that "most of the fans, especially the girls, got all thrilled only about the young and handsome matinee idols," it also noted that now "*everybody* recognizes [Chaney] as among the greatest character actors" (Anon. 1923b, 112, our italics). Implicitly, then, this fan's adoration of Chaney was not seen as *uncommon*, and her declaration was only "unusual" because the magazine rarely got "enthusiastic letters about the character actors." But Chaney was clearly seen as a special case, and the magazine promised this fan (and its readers more generally) that it would cater to his growing fan-base by carrying "a story on Mr. Chaney soon."

## Conclusion

As we have seen, then, in the silent and early sound period, horror was not primarily associated with low-budget production, nor was it simply seen as a disreputable genre. Certainly there were some who objected to horror materials, but even then the real anxiety seems to have been bound up with cinema's status as a new medium, rather than with the genre itself. As Carl Laemmle commented in relation to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the "public still likes dripping red meat in its literature and on its stage, but not on its screen" (Laemmle quoted in Anon. 1923a, 440). His point was that the cinema was still required to meet different standards from established media such as literature and theatre, but this did not mean that his adaption of Victor Hugo's novel was anything but a high-budget and prestigious production. For most of the 1920s and early 1930s, then, horror was arguably received as a prestigious genre that was used to sell the cinema as an artistic medium and many horror films (and the figures associated with them) were overtly praised for exploring and/or demonstrating the medium's potential at a time when the industry was still eager to achieve cultural legitimacy. The genre also benefited from an association with middle class women—it not only gained prestige through this association but its

ability to attract these audiences also helped to enhance the reputation of cinema more generally.

The decline in the horror genre's status seems to have occurred in the late 1920s, when a boom in production made it less rare and distinctive, and horror films started to disappear from lists of the very best of the new films. However, this was still a period in which "horror" was associated with big-budgets, key directors and major stars. The genre's association with low-budget production today may be due to critical approaches to the 1930s and 1940s that focus on Universal at a time when the studio was going through major financial problems. As Peter Hutchings has argued, 1930s horror has often been misunderstood because "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" and he argues that one gets a very different sense of the period when "one looks at horror films produced by other studios" (Hutchings 2004, 14). In other words, even in the 1930s, Universal was only one type of horror and Lionel Barrymore continued to play horror roles until the late 1930s, and often in horror films that were overtly modelled on the Lon Chaney films of the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, the assumption that horror was both disreputable and associated with low-budget filmmaking may be a self-sustaining fiction: focusing on low-budget filmmaking in a period tends to marginalize or misinterpret the big-budget productions of that period. As Jancovich (2017a) has demonstrated in relation to the 1940s, the focus on Universal's low-budget productions have led scholars to marginalise numerous big budget horror productions and to misread the horror films associated with Val Lewton, films that were not low-budget productions: they were specially designed to occupy the space between Universal's low-budget horror films and the big-budget horror films that followed the phenomenal success of David O. Selznick's *Rebecca* (1940), a film on which Lewton had worked as a script editor (Jancovich 2017a).

The focus on low-budget and disreputable horror films has therefore persisted for another reason: it has enabled scholars to privilege the genre; to distinguish it from Hollywood norms; and to present it, as we have seen, as "the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive" (Wood 1986, 84).

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of how 1940s horror films figure in this discourse, see *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade*, edited by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Charlie Ellb e, and Kristopher Woolter (Lexington, 2015).



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