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Horror Film Atmosphere as Anti-narrative (and Vice Versa)

Robert Spadoni

It's a perfect night for mystery and horror.
The air itself is filled with monsters.

MARY SHELLEY, *THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN* (1935)

Horror films, particularly those made before 1960, are often praised for their atmosphere, a word that comes up constantly in reviews and academic writing on these and many other sorts of film. Far less common have been attempts to define what is meant by this term. And yet some filmmakers seem to understand, intuitively perhaps, just what to do to enhance the aesthetic, and, they hope, economic power of their productions. They make memorably atmospheric films, but how do they achieve this?

A basic way to explore this question is to regard an "atmospheric film" as a system, and to ask how the parts of that system relate to each other. In this spirit, this chapter explores a possible relationship between horror film atmosphere and narrative, which is, succinctly put, that less of one can mean more of the other. I will suggest that this push-pull dynamic has long been grasped by critics and others writing about horror as well as other types of film; I will briefly consider some implications of this dynamic; and finally I will turn to a 1960 British horror film, *The City of the Dead* (US title: *Horror Hotel*). This film's curiously bifurcated structure affords us a chance to observe how the different sorts of narrative that can be concentrated within, and distributed

across, a film's formal make-up can yield predictably different atmospheric results.

A seesaw

> Some of these accounts are hardly stories at all, but rather studies in elusive impressions and half-remembered snatches of dream. Plot is everywhere negligible, and atmosphere reigns untrammeled.
>
> (Lovecraft, 2000, p. 67, on short stories by Algernon Blackwood).

A long-standing tendency in critical writing on horror films is to find some films succeeding, as films, on the strength of their atmospheres alone. Of *The Old Dark House* (1932), one writer notes that "the plot of *House* is not an important element in the film. Instead, the significant points are its mood and atmosphere" (Ellis, 1980, p. 137). More recently, another finds that "the story holds a few surprises, but what makes 'Let Me In' [2010] so eerily fascinating is the mood it creates" (Scott, 2010).[1] Such comments suggest that a sufficiently atmospheric film can be critically well received despite any narrative deficiencies it may possess.

A stronger claim, running alongside this trend, is that atmosphere can not only make up for a weak narrative but thrive in the vacuum created by its diminished force. When a plot's gears mesh tightly, an atmospheric spell may quickly be broken, as when, in *Castle in Flanders* (1936), "the ambiguous atmosphere is admirably maintained: it is when the hero turns out not to be a ghost at all that we lose interest and the film reality" (Greene, 1995 [1937], p. 219). Explanation can be bad for atmosphere. Backstories, and other means of filling gaps that would make a character's motivations or nature less mysterious, can cause an atmosphere to dissipate. By this thinking, *Halloween* (1978) goes right where *Psycho* (1960) goes wrong: "If there is an over-explained logic to Norman Bates' crimes, an earlier scenario that motivated his pathological violence (a thread continued in most slasher movies), such basic information is almost entirely lacking in *Halloween*, adding to its atmosphere of encroaching doom" (Worland, 2007, p. 232).

The collective hunch that is implicitly expressed by these comments is that atmosphere can gather and thicken in the textual spaces opened up by sparse storytelling. If this proposition seems intuitively correct, can we formulate it more explicitly? I suggest that one way to do so is to use what we know

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[1] In this chapter, I treat "mood" and "atmosphere" as synonyms, as writers frequently use these terms interchangeably.

about narrative, which has been well described in Film Studies literature, in order to explore the much more nebulous thing we call atmosphere.

Such a strategy may lead us to hypothesize that atmosphere and narrative are animated by antipodal energies. Narrative represents a force of rationality within a film; to varying degrees, this formal subsystem clearly delineates space and time, and forges causal links that bind a film's elements together. Atmosphere, at least as some understand it, consists of something altogether different. Insight into its nature can be gained by looking outside Film Studies. For example, the architect and architecture theorist Mark Wigley (1998, p. 27) writes:

> those who embrace effect cannot approach atmosphere directly—cannot point to it, cannot teach it. Atmosphere escapes the discourse about it. By definition, it lacks definition. It is precisely that which escapes analysis. Any specific proposal for constructing atmosphere, no matter how changeable or indeterminate, is no longer atmospheric. [...] Atmosphere may be the core of architecture but it is a core that cannot simply be addressed or controlled.[2]

Wigley's words resonate with an idea expressed by Julian Hanich when he writes:

> materialist accounts of the natural sciences [...] reject everything that is not recordable: what cannot be measured does not exist. Many rejections of phenomenological descriptions must therefore be ascribed to such limitations. This certainly goes for vital cinematic phenomena such as brooding atmospheres.
>
> (Hanich, 2010, p. 47)

Both Wigley and Hanich address a thorny problem, which is how to go about rationally describing something that itself may be irrational. They also suggest that atmosphere and narrative can be set in opposition to each other. The two are mutually supportive but their relationship is not, as has often been suggested, one mainly of first and second tiers within a film's formal system, with narrative on top (see e.g. Hanich, 2010, pp. 170–1; for a refutation see Spadoni, forthcoming). Going further, we may surmise that the two can exist in a film in a kind of inverse relationship, meaning again that more of one will mean less of the other.

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[2] Gernot Böhme notes that "atmospheres have something irrational about them, in a literal sense: something inexpressible" (2012, p. 2; see also Böhme, 1993, p. 113).

To make such a claim is to risk oversimplification, and it seems to ignore the fact that every film narrative exudes its own kind of atmosphere (on narrative's contributions to horror film atmosphere see Spadoni, forthcoming). Thus let me stress that I am only describing one possible relationship between these two aspects of a film, albeit an important one for understanding many pre-modern horror films, as I hope to show. I propose that one way to explore this hypothesis is to consider some implications that would follow from it.

Three implications

"The great clump of trees looked like a tomb in which my house was buried" – thus we are introduced at the start into the tale's sepulchral atmosphere.

(Todorov (1975 [1970], p. 81) on a Guy de Maupassant short story)

One implication is that a filmmaker wishing to create a strong atmosphere will lay importance on a film's beginning. If we take the beginning of a film to be its title screen, what may immediately come to mind are all those screens in which the title is carved on a rough plank of wood, or rises out of a swamp, or is written on sand, or forms out of smoke. Reflecting on what critics often mean by atmosphere brings us quickly to considerations of fogbound London streets, or the particular sounds of a carnival that a film gets exactly right, or, less tangibly, the feel of a certain historical period that a film captures perfectly. Atmosphere is in the air, spread out. It inhabits the details surrounding—and, less often recognized by critics and other writers—constituting the action. It is the texture of the world a film creates. A film that etches its title into something as tactile as sand or wood is setting up its atmosphere from the outset, as this writer understands: "In *The Cat and the Canary* [1939], a Gothic atmosphere is established from the film's opening, where cobwebs are brushed away to reveal the credits" (Conrich, 2004, p. 48).

It is not difficult to find writers who would agree that a film's beginning is an especially opportune place to attend to atmosphere. An atmosphere may even be established before a film begins. A guide to silent film musical accompaniment notes that "sometimes a carefully prepared number which embodies the general atmosphere or dominant emotion of the play ushers in the picture" (Beynon, 1921, p. 74). Another example is illustrated by *The Golem* (1920), which, as the *Motion Picture News* reported, was "presented with an atmospheric prologue, in which seven singers render 'Eli! Eli!' with fantastic stage setting of ancient Jewish period" (Altman, 2004, p. 381). Here,

what from a narrative standpoint is a form of "excess" becomes permissible when it begins a film and when it functions to create atmosphere.

Edging into the start of the film proper, we come to those atmospheric film titles and to other sorts of introductory text. Another guide, this time for screenwriters, offers the following advice for composing titles: "Restrict the average title to about twenty words—fewer is generally better, except in the case of introductory or prologue titles in which the atmosphere of an entire picture is being presented" (Gale, 1936, p. 24). Another form of excusable excess thus occupies a similar place and serves a similar purpose. And, of course, once a film begins, the real work of building atmosphere gets underway. A writer notes that the opening of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932) "provides lots of atmosphere right in the beginning before digging into the exposition and main plot" (Lennig, 2003, p. 153).[3]

From our perspective, it makes sense for a beginning to be a place to lay on the atmosphere especially heavily because it is here that the imprint of the narrative on a film will be at its faintest. In a film's first moments we rarely know the characters' names, their goals, or the obstacles to their goals, and few or no patterns of development will have begun to be elaborated. The story's grip on the film has not yet tightened. This creates an opportunity, a gap that a filmmaker can fill with atmosphere. And, once established with bold strokes, an atmosphere can then spread across a film, and a filmmaker can return to it later, either to pump it up again or to alter it—but the outset is a crucial place to begin the work.

A second implication brings us back to those letters carved on planks of wood, and to the painted swamps and Parisian rooftops making up the backgrounds of film titles. This is the importance of background and environment for creating atmosphere. (On cinema in relation to weather and environment, including weather as "atmosphere" see Hanich, 2010, pp. 170–2; McKim, 2013.) This may be more intuitively obvious than my claims about a film's beginning, but look at how these two implications interweave in most films. It is standard for a classical Hollywood film to begin a scene with an establishing shot. What is being established? These shots show the space wherein the ensuing action, and subsequent closer views—medium shots, close-ups, and so on—will unfold. But an establishing shot also shows us a space, and a space can carry a stronger whiff of atmosphere than the tighter framings that typically come later in a scene. And so this fixture of classical scene construction works also to establish atmosphere.

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[3]The importance of beginnings for establishing atmosphere is noted by Greg M. Smith, who advises critics "to pay close attention to the way that emotion cues act together to create mood at the beginning of a film" (2003, pp. 43–4).

One is likely to see more space not just at the starts of scenes but at the starts of films. Extreme long shots often take us into a film's world. We get sweeping shots of the environment, and it is here—in these wide shots, where a film is not unspooling a tight narrative or negotiating a hairpin plot turn—that atmosphere rushes in. The tendency to exploit, simultaneously, these two atmospherically privileged aspects of a text pre-dates cinema. This section's epigraph attests to this, as does a nineteenth-century magic lantern show in which "the first projection that the audience saw […] was a lightning-filled sky" (Barber, 1989, p. 77).

Of course, a filmmaker may place emphasis on the environment at other points in the film as well. The filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti wrote: "I have a bit of dog-barking in my sound library which I sometimes stick into the track when I wish to suggest the open air, and a pleasant, gay atmosphere" (1985, p. 108). At the climax of *Frankenstein* (1931), "even so apparently innocent a structure as a windmill lends itself to the unrelieved gloom of atmosphere. It stands gaunt and alone on a high, barren hill against a backdrop of scudding clouds" (Douglas, 1966, p. 124). And, in *Psycho*, "the plush rooms contain conspicuous carpets that contribute to the hushed, smothering atmos-phere of the house, which is crammed with furniture and objects" (Jacobs, 2007, p. 129). Environment is background. Characters, for the most part, occupy a film's foreground, and they move the narrative along. Foreground/background thus meshes with narrative/atmosphere as mutually supportive but contrasting entities within a film's formal system.

A third implication brings us to particular films and their makers. All films have beginnings. Most, I would argue, have atmospheric beginnings. And all films have backgrounds. But some films are more atmospheric than others, and some of these have attenuated narratives. Take *Vampyr* (1932), a film that thwarts narrative comprehension at every turn, and not by being convoluted or too fast-paced to follow. Things move slowly, and yet the viewer is frequently lost. If this misty ghost tale is not atmospheric, then no film is. A writer notes that, with it, the director Carl Theodor Dreyer "did not lay much emphasis on the actual tale," and that even the scene of the vampire's staking "is not made the dramatic climax, hardly even a release" (Neergaard, 1950, p. 27).

Also distinctive among horror films, but less esoteric than *Vampyr*, is Val Lewton's horror cycle of the 1940s. These films, again, are atmospheric if any films are—and their narratives have also been much remarked upon. For example, the films "stressed mood and atmosphere rather than star, story value, or special effects" (Schatz, 1997, p. 232). *Cat People* (1942) has been compared to director Paul Schrader's 1982 remake in the following way: "Lewton's film, like all of his outstanding horror pictures at RKO, emphasized mystery, implication, and atmosphere. By contrast, Schrader played up sex

and explicit violence, attributes that overly literalized the ambiguities and narrative mystery of Lewton's original production" (Prince, 2000, p. 301). Schrader explains and shows more, and his film is a more arid production than the original.

Lewton's films foreground their environments and make their narratives less explicit at the same time. *Leopard Man* (1943), Manny Farber wrote, gives "the creepy impression that human beings and 'things' are inter-changeable and almost synonymous and that both are pawns of a bizarre and terrible destiny" (1998 [1951], p. 49). In that film's most famous sequence, a young woman tries to get inside the safety of her home but is mauled to death by a leopard instead. We do not see the violence. In characteristic Lewton fashion, it is only suggested by the frantically moving door latch, the sounds of her pleading and screaming, the door palpitating once in its frame while scratching noises are heard, and finally blood pooling under the door. Of this sequence, Farber wrote that "all the psychological effects—fear and so on—were transformed by [its director Jacques] Tourneur into nonhuman components of the picture" (ibid., p. 50). Farber is describing the importance of *things* in the Lewton universe. This is tied to what people often mean when they celebrate a Lewton film's atmosphere. Instead of seeing the act, we see only effects and traces of it, such as shadows, sounds, or a torn garment. Actions become less concrete when they are projected onto the environment. And a film's environment is atmospheric. These become charac-teristic attributes of Lewton's films, of Tourneur's films, and perhaps never more potently than when the two collaborated.

One such collaboration, and another pinnacle of horror film atmosphere, is *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). This film, writes Chris Fujiwara (1998, pp. 86–7), takes

elliptical, oblique narrative procedures to astonishing extremes. The dialogue is almost nothing but a commentary on past events, obsessively revising itself, finally giving up the struggle to explain and surrendering to a mute acceptance of the inexplicable. We watch the slow, atmospheric, lovingly detailed scenes with delight and fascination, realizing at the end that we have seen nothing but the traces of a conflict decided in advance.

Fujiwara also writes that "the opening image of Betsy and Carrefour (the guardian of the crossroads) walking along a shoreline will prove not to have a place in the narrative" (ibid., p. 88). Here, we have a beginning—tiny silhou-etted figures beneath a sky that dominates the frame—showing us something that never happens in the film proper. It serves no narrative purpose, only an atmospheric one. Another critic writes of a famous sequence in the film:

Even the highly atmospheric walk through the cane fields seems almost an exercise in deception, since we are led to believe, by Betsy's loss of the "voodoo badge" needed to pass by Carrefour, by the recurring images of death and decay, and by the eerie sound effects, that this journey is indeed hazard filled; however, nothing happens.

(Telotte, 1985, p. 52)

Nothing happens, and yet this sequence, in which the wind loudly and insistently whips through the setting, performs a vital function. Finally, of Lewton's films, Mark Robson, who directed *The Seventh Victim* (1943) and other entries in the cycle, said:

These were unstructured works. Unstructured in the sense that character conflicts between protagonist and antagonist were diffuse. I think that this added to the charm of those films. In ways they broke many of the rules of story telling. They're almost film novels. Their form is different from any films of that period or since—they're much freer. They follow very few dramaturgical rules.

(quoted in Peary, 1973, p. 37)

I would argue that some of this diffuseness owes to the hallmark Lewton transposition, noted by Farber, of actions onto things and the environment. It is here that we can turn to the greatest theorist of atmosphere that we have, namely German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who wrote:

tone and emanation—in my terminology, *ekstases*—determine the atmosphere radiated by things. They are therefore the way in which things are felt to be present in space. This gives us a further definition of atmosphere: it is the felt presence of something or someone in space.

(2012, p. 8; italics in original)

An artist who can make things "radiate" with "felt presence" in an especially intense fashion will produce an atmospheric film. Asking how creative practitioners such as Lewton and Tourneur de-emphasize the human within the environment, the foreground against the background, and the narrative against the atmosphere may help us to explore with greater concreteness what is meant by that intangible thing atmosphere, and to consider why some films, more than others, brim with this elusive aesthetic air.

The City of the Dead

I feel I need some first-hand research. I want to get the atmosphere.
(Nan Barlow, *The City of the Dead*)

Not as well known as Lewton's films, but often compared to them (see e.g. Pirie, 1973, p. 111; Newman, 2002, p. 54), is *The City of the Dead*. This film has also been compared to works by H. P. Lovecraft (see e.g. Hardy, 1986, p. 129; Hunt, 2002, p. 83), who called atmosphere "the all-important thing" (2000, p. 23). The film has been called atmospheric by almost everyone who has written about it. A pair of authors labels it "one of the most atmospheric chillers of the decade" (Clark and Senn, 2011, p. 26), another "one of the most atmospheric horror films ever" (Johnson and Miller, 2004, p. 96). In this film, undergraduate Nan Barlow travels to an old Massachusetts town, Whitewood, in order to research witchcraft. Unbeknown to her, the town harbors a group of undead devil worshipers led by Elizabeth Selwyn, who was burned at the stake in 1692, but not before she had made a pact with the devil to go on serving him in return for his protection. Her service, assisted by acolyte Jethrow Keane, involves human sacrifice, and Nan becomes the next victim. When Nan fails to return from the trip, her brother Dick and boyfriend Bill go in search of her, eventually rescuing Selwyn's next intended sacrifice and sending the witch into perdition.

Critics find *The City of the Dead* possessing, to pronounced degrees, attributes I see characterizing some atmospheric films. One is that its narrative is notably underdeveloped. The film has a "simple yet involving script" ("City of the Dead", 2003, p. 87); is "repetitive and short on complexity" (Rigby, 2000, p. 68); and is marked by "eccentric minimalism" (Bansak, 1995, p. 506). Here is the best reflection on the film's narrative I have found:

The City of the Dead is not a complicated movie. There is no psychological dimension to the developing horror. Instead, we get a story that is simply about light vs. dark. We don't know why Elizabeth Selwyn became attracted to witchcraft. We don't know the nature of her relationship with Jethrow Keane. We don't know why the townsfolk of Whitewood have become attracted to the dark forces. We don't know why Nan is attracted to occult studies. Ultimately, the movie offers a simplistic dichotomy of good/normal society […] vs. the evil outsiders.

(Johnson, 2002)

And yet, with all this pointing to the simple story, it is hard to a find a bad review of *The City of the Dead*. Even the following criticism of the film is, for

our purposes, noteworthy: "In my opinion, there's too much atmosphere; I'd gladly trade some of it for something in the way of some good story twists or a couple of surprise revelations" (Sindelar, 2006).

A more common response is for critics to find the narrative playing a role in making the film as memorable as it is. For one critic, *The City of the Dead* is a "spare but harrowing scare tale" (Kane, 2002, p. M20), which "continually provides interest even when the scenes are otherwise pedestrian" (S. Harrison, 1995, p. 24). For another, "the uncomplicated plot is greatly enhanced by atmospheric black-and-white photography, taut direction, and some eerie performances" (Smith, 2000, p. 50). This film appears to benefit from the seesaw dynamic that I describe above: "Although cheaply made, studio-bound and short on complexity, the film has a beautifully eerie Lovecraftian atmosphere" (Hardy, 1986, p. 129).

In light of our implications, first, and least remarkably, the film begins in 1692 with a shot of a flaming brazier, while the party that has condemned Selwyn emerges from the far distance and marches into the foreground. Mist roils and swirls through every part of the frame. We thus have an opening that shows us the environment before it shows us any people.

More distinctive is the heavy presence of the setting one feels at many points in the film, an emphasis that is signaled by its original and its U.S. titles—*The City of the Dead* and *Horror Hotel*—both of which name places. Critics have picked up on how the film emphasizes this presence as something textural, appealing to the skin as much as to the eyes. Foremost in this regard is the fog, certainly a generic trait of the horror film but also, through its quantity and density, something that sets this film apart from others of its type.

The City of the Dead is a film in which the background refuses to stay in the background. An admirer finds that "so pervasive is the fog that it practically becomes an important character in the film" (Shinnick, 2002, p. 75). Director John Llewellyn Moxey recalled: "We tried to lay it in layers, not just in a mass on the floor like you often see it. By changing the heat on the guns that fired it, we found that we could lay it in layers. That worked very well" (Weaver, 1998, p. 257). One does get a sense that this fog—in this preternaturally still and decrepit town, constructed entirely indoors—was rolled onto the set in layers, like one carpet on top of another. One layer seems to bump and nudge against the next, as the mass refuses to rise and dissipate like any earthly fog. The mist is so soupy that, when Nan stops at a gas station, it collects around her car like liquid—and note how it sits on the roof of the station like snow (see Figure 7.1).

Many critics have tried their hand at characterizing this visual quality of *The City of the Dead*, and their choice of language exhibits a pattern. Whitewood is "saturated in fog and gloom" (Pirie, 1973, p. 111), "blanketed in a perpetual
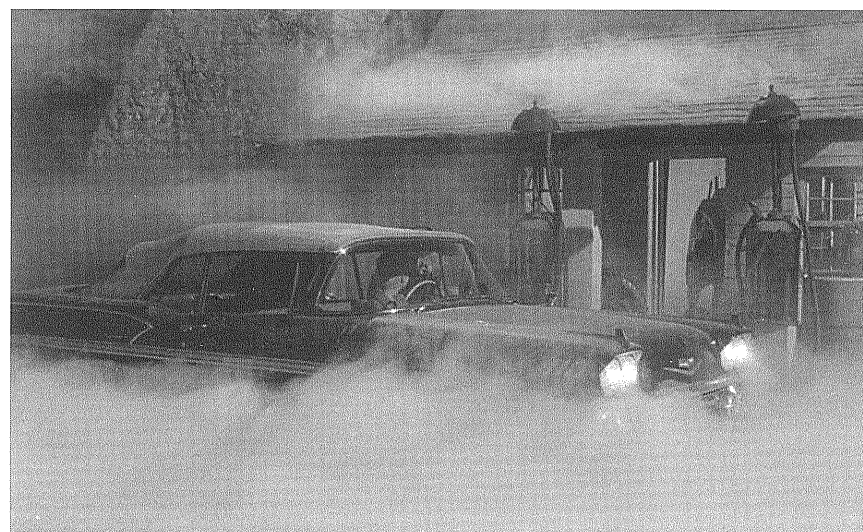
FIGURE 7.1 The City of the Dead. *Nan stops at a gas station to ask for directions.*

fog" (Clark and Senn, 2011, p. 216), and "shrouded in knee-high fog" (Hogan, 1996, p. 46). It is a place where "billows of white smoke (looking like clouds) snake across the ground" (Sipos, 2010, p. 137). Another writes that the settings are "swathed in more mist than all the other films in this survey put together" (Rigby, 2000, p. 67). Shrouds, blankets, snakes—this fog wraps and enfolds, appealing more emphatically to touch than the wispier stuff seen in other horror films.

The fog stops at the doorways leading to the town's interiors, but the insistent tactility of the settings does not. The lobby of the Raven's Inn, where Nan spends her last days, is alive with dark and dancing shadows thrown up by the fireplace (see Figure 7.2). The still image included here does not capture the manic movement of these shadows, and how they subsume everything, including Nan, into one frenetically crawling backdrop. Writers have also recognized these shadows and their excessive salience (see e.g. Johnson and Miller, 2004, p. 96; Rigby, 2000, p. 67).

Another setting is Nan's room at the inn (see Figure 7.3). It is not clear what these walls are made of—knotty wood, or perhaps this is outstandingly ugly and ineptly hung wallpaper. The uncertainty only makes me stare at these backgrounds more intently. The walls seem to me to be thickly coated with centuries of corrosion. It does not take much to envision rust and barnacles creeping over their surfaces. They are, at any rate, completely covered in roughness, bumps, and ridges.
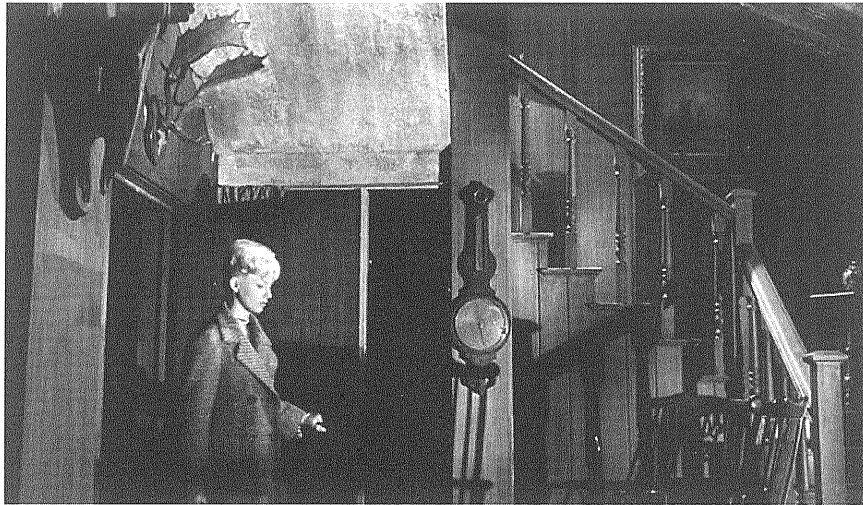
FIGURE 7.2 *Nan steps into the lobby of the Raven's Inn.*
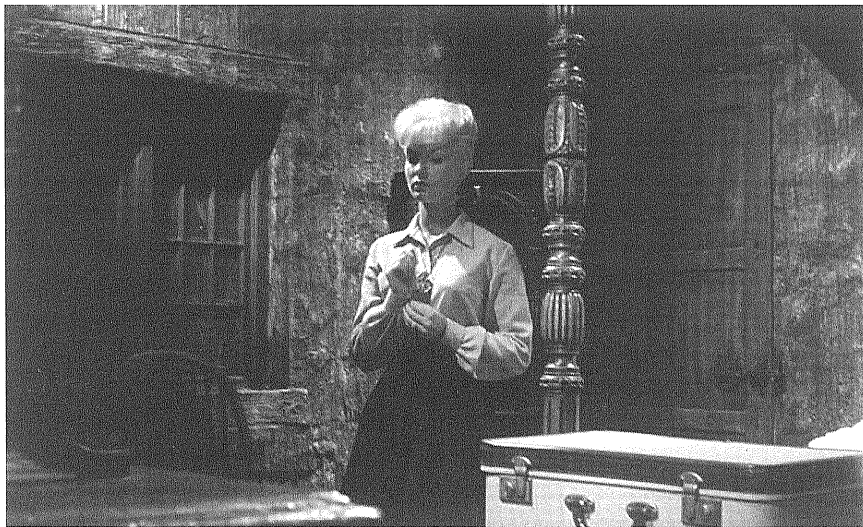

FIGURE 7.3 *Nan in her room at the inn*

Settings importune themselves on the action with their weird texturality and foregroundedness. Faces, which are more conventionally foregrounded, also prompt some critics to reach for language that evokes the sense of touch. Keane and a blind priest character have "shadow-etched faces" (Newman, 2002, p. 55); and Keane and Selywn have faces that look "almost as though sculpted in clay" (Johnson and Miller, 2004, p. 96). The voices of these

characters, in particular Keane's, go a long way to extending this quality to the soundtrack. Regarding Nan, Keane intones, "He will be pleased," laying emphasis with his sonorous baritone on the word "he," and leaving little doubt as to who "he" is. This character has been called "sepulchral voiced" (Clark and Senn, 2011, p. 217), while another critic writes that actor Valentine Dyall "possessed a voice that sounded as though it originated at the bottom of a well instead of within a human diaphragm" (Hogan, 1996, p. 47). We are invited to think of deep, echoing places by a voice—an element that typically functions in a film as primarily a carrier of semantic meaning. We listen to the characters' words to gain story information about what happened, what is going to happen, and how the characters feel. But, as Johnson (quoted above) notes, this film does not bother much with such details. Instead, a voice's grain acts as a kind of special effect; we let Dyall's basso profundo pour over us, just as, when Nan is in the inn lobby, we listen to the too-loud crackling of the fire, and to the clock that does not just tick but creaks with an insistently aged and wooden timbre. This film appeals to our sense of touch not just through our eyes but through our ears as well.

Do these qualities contribute to the film's atmosphere? While the answer is obvious, I want to point out how effortlessly writers retool the language they use to describe the setting in order to describe something more abstract. The film is "knee-deep in New England creepiness" (Rigby, 2000, p. 67), with a "dry ice-shrouded Lovecraftian atmosphere" (Hunt, 2002, p. 83). It "brims with atmosphere and suspense" (Kane, 2002, p. M20), and is simultaneously "drenched in fog and smoke" and "dripping mood" ("City of the Dead", 2003, p. 87).

Fog churns through every part of Whitewood, and Whitewood dominates the story, but I would not argue that *The City of the Dead* is atmospherically homogeneous. Relevant here is an oft-made comparison to *Psycho* (see e.g. Weldon, 1983, p. 329; Hardy, 1986, p. 129; Johnson and Miller, 2004, p. 96). In both films, the central female protagonist is killed part-way through, after which a sibling and a lover come looking for her, eventually uncovering and thwarting the respective woman's murderer. These and other similarities have prompted some writers to view Moxey's film as an imitation of Hitchcock's, while others note that the production schedules of the two make the similarities a coincidence (on the films' production schedules, see Clark and Senn, 2011, p. 216). What matters for us is that these similarities point to the fact that *The City of the Dead* breaks neatly into two parts.

In each part, a different woman is imperiled, and we have many shots of the foggy town. A few writers have complained that, for example, "the entire second half of the movie is almost a complete repeat of the first" (McDaniel, 2006; see also e.g. B. Harrison, 1995, p. 74; Scheib, n.d.; Clark, n.d.).

However, I would argue that the differences outweigh the similarities, and that these differences can help us further to explore the inverse relationship that film atmosphere and narrative sometimes exhibit.

Critics, I was surprised to discover, do not explicitly reflect upon atmospheric differences between the two parts. This is possibly because, once established in the film's first half, the atmosphere percolates forward, all the way to the end. One critic, who finds that "Nan's drive into Whitewood is wonderfully atmospheric," then notes, of the film's second part, the "exciting, fiery ending of *The Witches*" (B. Harrison, 1995, p. 74). He echoes many others who praise the action-filled climax, for example:

It's the graveyard ending which will blow you away. It has to be the most spectacular set-piece that 50s/60s British horror produced, and the film is worth sitting through for the last 10 minutes alone. Noble teenage sacrifice and dozens of exploding monks—does it get any better than that?
("City of the Dead", 2010; see also Weldon, 1983, p. 330; B. Harrison, 1995, p. 74; S. Harrison, 1995, p. 24; Svehla, 1995, p. 71; Cowan, 2008, p. 223)

Things happen in the film's second part: the ending delivers spectacular action.

The second half provides thrills, but it is, I submit, chiefly the first half that has earned *The City of the Dead* its reputation as an atmospheric film. If the second half feels to some like a virtual replay of the first, it is a replay in fast forward; the time spent in Whitewood is briefer, and the stillness that hangs over Nan's time there is largely absent. If, as I believe, the first half is more atmospheric than the second, we should be able to probe this claim by contrasting the narrative energies of the two parts.

When Nan is driving to Whitewood, her car sits in the soupy fog while hidden stagehands rock it back and forth to simulate a bumpy road. This simulation is not very convincing. The effect is of a stationary car rocking. The snatches of background that slip past appear as if they are moving more than the car does. Nan is not going anywhere. What is the distance between Nan's college and this town? The question seems meaningless, the journey imaginary. Moreover, the locations of Whitewood's few buildings, relative to each other, seem stable enough, but the geography of the town for Nan is not the same as it will be for Dick and Bill when it is their turn to navigate the space.

Time supplies another axis along which we can contrast the two halves. Keane tells Nan that the town is "off the beaten path. Few tourists come here. For Whitewood, time stands still." Time in Whitewood, in Nan's part of the story, is undifferentiated. Then is now is then. In the inn hangs a

plaque that reads: "March 3rd, 1692—On this site was burned for witchcraft Elizabeth Selwyn." This spot is fixed in space, and, since Selwyn made her pact and issued her curse, it and Whitewood are fixed in time as well. We see working phones, but the town still seems to be unhooked from the grid of modern society. Its connection to its past overwhelms any to its present. Like the car that traverses the non-space that separates Whitewood from the twentieth century, time is unmoving.

This static sense of time is reinforced by the Black Mass ritual at which Nan is sacrificed. It occurs on Candlemas Eve, a holiday that the worshipers have appropriated for their own dark purposes. As a holiday, it carves out a time-space that re-creates the last Candlemas Eve, and the one before that, and so on. Days of remembrance are about a relationship to the past. These special days in the calendar are sectioned off from the ones preceding and following them. What is more, Selywn must wait until "the hour of thirteen" to plunge the dagger. The hour of thirteen is outside time.

I would label the temporality in this part of the film "atmospheric time," an emblem of which is the clock on the town church (see Figure 7.4). These hands do move, and show the proper time, as does the clock in the inn lobby. But like that clock's creaky ticking, on this face—again covered with what might be wood grain or stains, or both—we read not only information but also texture.

Narratives propel persons and objects through space and time. Their velocity shapes our sense of a plot's tautness and pacing. By this standard,
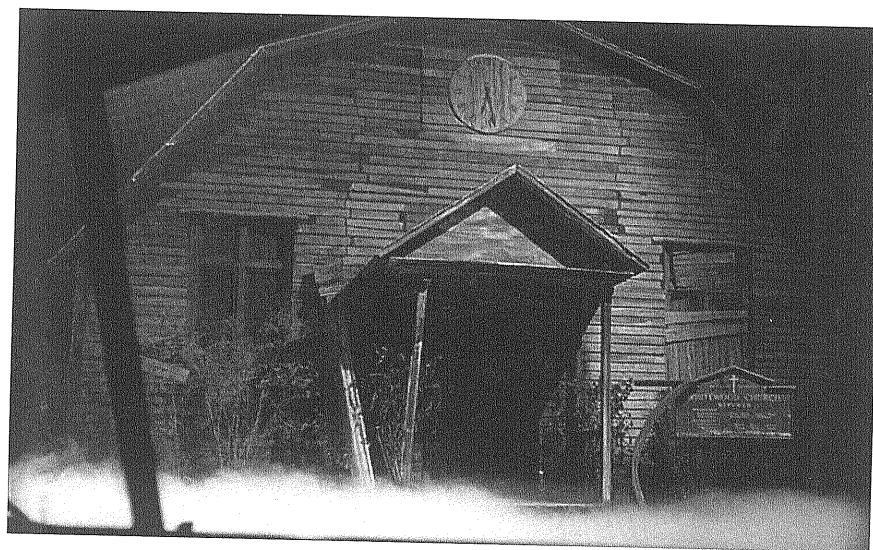

FIGURE 7.4 *The church in Whitewood.*

the first part of *The City of the Dead* has almost no tautness or pacing at all. This becomes clearer in a consideration of a third dimension of the film's narrative: causality. Here we can try to locate Nan's agency within the transpiring events. She possesses virtually none at all. She is never more than an obedient pawn, even when she thinks she is taking advantage of an opportunity to do firsthand research; her professor, Driscoll, turns out to be one of the undead townspeople, a follower of Selywn. A symptom of Nan's lack of narrative agency is the trapdoor in her room. There is no ring or handle on her side of the door, Selywn tells her, because there is only earth underneath. In truth, it is not yet time for her to open it. When that time comes, she hears a banging on her windowpane and sees the handle swinging there from a string. Nan descends and is murdered.

The second part of the film has a different feel than the first, for reasons we can describe concretely. A graphic match joins a shot of the plunging dagger to one of a knife cutting a birthday cake. We're back in the electrically lit brightness of the twentieth century, where we learn that Nan was expected at this party and that it has been over two weeks since Bill last received a letter from her. We thus have a good sense of how long it has been since Nan's death. We are back in time. Meanwhile, in Whitewood, Pat, a woman with whom Nan had conferred briefly, is concerned about her disappearance and starts looking into it. She greets someone from the sheriff's office, who is in town because Dick and Bill have filed a missing person's report. Thus is launched the theme of investigation that will turn the second half of the film into a search for clues and a hunt for the truth that will culminate in the exciting climax.

Pat comes to the college and shows Bill and Dick a sheet of Driscoll's stationery, on which he wrote Nan directions to Whitewood, and Nan's bracelet, which has been retrieved by the housekeeper at the inn. One clue leads to another, as the trio begin to retrace Nan's path. A narrative of what happened to her starts to come together.

The men take separate cars to Whitewood, and for each ride we get more of the unconvincing shots of cars rocking in the fog. But the rocking is less pronounced than in Nan's drive, and her ride was quieter; only a bit of jazz music was heard, while upbeat and even jaunty jazz plays when we watch the men. The music alters the mood of their journey through the mist. This deathly atmosphere does not swamp these characters; they are going to cut through it.

Moreover, the sequences of Dick and Bill driving make more extensive use than Nan's of through-the-windshield point-of-view shots. Through these, we share the gaze of these empowered male characters, to borrow from 1970s spectator theory; and these shots show us that the car really is moving

through space. In Nan's sequence, we see only one such shot. It shows Keane standing at a crossroads, and the sight of him causes Nan to pull over: it arrests her forward motion. Bill proves harder to stop. He crashes his car when a fiery vision of Selwyn forces him off the road, but he continues on towards Whitewood and the film's climax.

Pat is selected as the next sacrifice, but Dick will rescue her at the last second. Thus, where the first half is one continuous descent, marked by inevitability, in which Nan is more or less sucked towards her doom, in the second Dick rushes towards the same spot where Nan died, and his intervention makes all the difference. Dick and Bill possess agency, and this is evident when Dick finds the same trapdoor that Nan went through. For him this door has a handle, and he lifts it with a hand that holds a gun (see Figure 7.5). Below, he finds Nan's necklace where, in her struggle, it was ripped from her neck. One clue leads to another. A trail leads towards climax and closure. When his flashlight fails, Dick holds up a cigarette lighter. Nothing is going to stop him. He and the story press forward. He walks where Nan had been dragged.

Dick brushes aside chains, cobwebs, and a spider as he penetrates the space, our sense of which changes after the men arrive in the town. Dick descends through the trapdoor, and later, with Pat, he exits through a crypt in the graveyard. The space of Whitewood has become legible, something that can be mapped. The space has become delineated by actions that slice through the formless fog.

FIGURE 7.5 *Dick, gun in hand, opens the trapdoor.*

Shooting his gun does not harm the worshipers, but Dick pushes past them, grabs Pat, and dashes out of the crypt. And, while Dick's gun was ineffective, the cross Bill holds up, when he learns that a cross's shadow will destroy the worshipers, becomes essentially a big gun which he aims, with explosive results. Agency is everywhere on display. Gone is the thick stillness and creeping dread that hung over the film's first part. The gain in narrative velocity and fire power corresponds with a palpable drop in atmosphere.

A question one might ask about this film, about more famous horror films, like Lewton's, and about B-movies like *The Strangler of the Swamp* (1946), is whether their narrative simplicity constitutes a serendipitous flaw or whether it represents the filmmakers' intuitive grasp of what it takes to conjure atmosphere. Whatever one may conclude about *The City of the Dead*, its unusual structure allows us to see, in action, the zero-sum game that narrative and atmosphere sometimes play. Lastly, further research might consider what, if any, correlation may be found among films that critics, at the time or decades later, praised as atmospheric and those that perform well at the box office.

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