

When we think of England, we immediately surround ourselves with fog, mist and rain, drawn to the landscape and physical beauty of the island. This collection of short essays from the British Silent Cinema Festival discusses the importance of background and setting in the creation of a uniquely British cinema before 1930. The contributors present diverse interpretations of the relevance of place and travel in the production of film. As the editors assert, visual composition serves to define the context and impact of the British silent film. English (and foreign) producers and directors were keenly aware of the importance landscape and setting had on the construction of film images. 'It has long been recognized that landscape is a critical component of British national identity . . . Many early film narratives explored the clash between rural and urban elements in surprising ways, with audiences being offered complex, and sometimes conflicting, meditations on modernity and life in modern Britain' (p. 4). As in a Dickens novel, background became foreground and locations themselves emerged as important actors in the narrative. Rolling hills and dark alleys related an unspoken truth of English life. Shades of gray spoke to the uncertainties of existence.

In concentrating on the aesthetic value of location, the collection presents a broad, and rather eclectic, perspective on the British experience, both past and present. We encounter the urban and rural violence of Edwardian Britain and the excitement of the English world of horse racing. The contributors transport us to the enticing allure of Nice, France and return us to modern London. We learn that the use of public space for street demonstrations became a subject for early filmmakers supporting the Labour Party. An especially interesting article concerns the role of landscape in the marketing of English films. We even meet an early cinematographer of Iceland. Finally, the slim volume concludes with a monologue from stage and screen actor Billy Merson and the advent of sound film in England. Although the articles are interesting and thought-provoking, the editors attempted to cover too wide an area in too little space. The contributions are well-written and documented; however, some are as short as seven pages and there is no logical articulation between them. In the end, the collection offers an interesting introduction to the study of early British Silent Cinema that leaves the reader wanting more.

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### **Uncanny Bodies: the coming of sound and the origins of the horror genre**

ROBERT SPADONI

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xii+190 pp., illus., bibliography and index, \$24.95 (paper), \$60.00 (cloth)

Are *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) really horror films at all? This question may seem pointless or even absurd at first glance, because in many ways the monsters introduced to the American screen in these films remain powerfully iconic signs of the horror genre even today. Yet almost no one in our own era claims to be *frightened* by the image of Bela Lugosi in his cape or Boris Karloff with

his protruding electrodes. In *Uncanny Bodies*, Robert Spadoni investigates the too commonly sidestepped paradox of how and why in 1931 these two films could shock their audiences so effectively that the phenomenon we now call the classic horror film could be built around them, but fail nearly completely to chill us today. Spadoni's answer is not the usual tired lament about how we have grown desensitized to the subtle art of suggested terror through exposure to decades of graphic gore, but an innovative, carefully historicized account of what it meant for viewers in 1931 to *hear* these monsters as well as see them.

Many scholars have noted that the birth of the classic horror film in America (1931–1936) coincides with the coming of sound (1927–1931), but no one has researched the meaning of this convergence with as much sustained attention or compelling insight as Spadoni. *Uncanny Bodies* claims that *Dracula*, in particular, must be reckoned with as a film whose effectiveness as horror is closely tied to recent viewer experiences with cinema's sometimes awkward and unsettling early transition to sound. Such experiences are difficult to reconstruct today, and even *Frankenstein*, released just nine months after *Dracula*, already testifies to a different degree of reliance on audience memories of early sound to deliver its scares. But meticulous examination of contemporary reviews and press coverage, combined with keen analysis of crucial moments in the films themselves, reveals what Spadoni calls 'the uncanny body modality of early sound films' (p. 11). This modality is theorized primarily as a form of reception available to viewers who experienced the disconcerting and often disturbing effects of one of cinema's greatest technological upheavals: the addition of 'synchronized' sound to a silent medium. For Spadoni, there is a richly uncanny quality to the early sound transition, in the Freudian sense of estranging the familiar. And it this uncanniness, manifested as a heightened audience awareness of cinema's images and sounds as artificially constructed, that the films capitalize on by merging viewer perceptions of flawed technological illusions involving 'liveness' with cinematic representations of the 'undead'.

For example, Lugosi's famously slow, over-enunciated speech in *Dracula* recalls the stilted vocalizations required of actors for the sake of intelligibility during the early sound transition. The eerie absence of ambient, diegetic sound during certain sequences in both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* highlights the supernatural aspects of their narratives and surroundings while linking such absences to what I might call 'the technological uncanny' of silent and early sound film. Spadoni outlines the contours of the technological uncanny by describing the transition to sound as a kind of return of the silent cinema's repressed, where surmounted feelings of strangeness attached to cinematic images originally perceived as 'living' shadows reassert themselves. By adapting Yuri Tsivian's notion of 'textualized' viewer responses from his book *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (1994), which Spadoni summarizes as 'a mechanism for looping processes of film reception back into the production sphere and into the most intimate contact with individual film texts' (p. 5), *Uncanny Bodies* foregrounds questions of spectatorship alongside the technological uncanny.

The horror film has played a central role in a number of important studies of cinematic spectatorship, including Linda Williams's essays 'When the Woman Looks' (1983) and 'Film Bodies' (1991), Carol J. Clover's book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), and Rhona J. Berenstein's book *Attack of the Leading Ladies* (1996). *Uncanny Bodies* is read usefully in conjunction with these works, since Spadoni is as removed

from the theoretical issues of gender and sexuality that motivate Williams, Clover and Berenstein as they are distant (with the exception of Berenstein) from Spadoni's concerns with historical reception and technological change. Still, I would have liked to see Spadoni engage these valuable and relevant theoretical texts more actively, just as I would have liked to see the persistent undercurrent of German Expressionism's influence brought into the foreground as a chapter in its own right. The fact that *Uncanny Bodies* focuses so tightly on *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* pays dividends in its bravura close readings of both films, but it also means that reflections on such fascinating classic horror films as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, 1932) are relegated to a brief conclusion. Those who dig deep in the conclusion will also discover Spadoni's provocative observation that 'so much of the genre's future would proceed through [the] similarly choppy waters' of the 'technically challenged sound transition' (p. 124). Again, this intriguing claim seems worthy of more detailed development.

*Uncanny Bodies* contributes substantially to the history of film sound as well as the history of classic horror cinema. Spadoni is well-versed in the voluminous scholarship pertaining to both of these areas, and his skill in joining them is one of the outstanding qualities of his book. Another is the suitability of *Uncanny Bodies* for use in the undergraduate classroom, since Spadoni's lucid, accessible prose tackles head-on what most instructors teaching the classic horror film must face at some point: the student who cannot possibly imagine being scared by *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*.

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### Citizen Spielberg

LESTER D. FRIEDMAN

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Toward the end of *Citizen Spielberg*, Lester Friedman argues that 'nothing Steven Spielberg directs can please the cadre of critics who despise his work' (p. 240). Friedman's book is written to answer these critics, who see Spielberg as having contributed to the 'dumbing down' of American film-making by simplistically playing into culturally and politically conservative hegemonic norms. Instead, Friedman's book suggests that during his long career, Spielberg 'has evolved into a director of thought and spirit as well as spectacle and style' (p. 10) and is therefore 'a far more complex, sophisticated, and wry filmmaker' than his critics suggest, one who is capable of intelligently and constructively subverting the form of mainstream cinematic convention.

When it appeared in late 2006, *Citizen Spielberg* stood as the first critical monograph covering the director's entire body of work, having since been joined by Nigel Morris's *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg* (2007). Friedman combines the methodologies of genre study and auteur criticism, grouping Spielberg's films together thematically rather than approaching them in strict chronological order. There are