Book Reviews

Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (University of California Press, 2007)

review by Reynold Humphries

At one point in his Introduction, Robert Spadoni refers to Tom Gunning's exhortation not to concentrate on '*narratives*' when analysing genre movies. Instead, we should 'pay closer attention to such formal characteristics of the films as editing, mise en scène, framing, and, most basically, the very *textures* of cinema as they are experienced by viewers and explored by genre film makers' (4; second emphasis added). To many readers this may seem like stating the obvious, but Spadoni earlier makes a remark about sound, to the effect that recognising the use of sound as crucial to the horror genre 'is not the same thing as identifying the major influence of the coming of sound on the genre's initial formulation. This influence has been missed perhaps because it reveals more in the way the first sound horror films *look* than in the way they *sound*' (2; emphasis added). That apparently casual remark should already have made us sit up and take notice, for it takes us to the heart of the matter.

In his particularly dense Introduction (three of the book's five chapters concentrate on *Dracula* [Tod Browning, 1931] and *Frankenstein* [James Whale, 1931], the first two films in Universal Pictures' cycle of 1930s horror), Spadoni is at pains to draw meaningful parallels between two quite different and seemingly discrete moments in film making and, especially, film going: an awareness on the part of early film audiences (up to 1910) of just how artificial films were; and the return of this artificiality in the status of the human figure in early sound films (5, 6). In this latter context he uses such deliberately loaded terms as 'ghostly' and 'uncanny', pointing out that figures in early sound films 'could seem both alive and dead at the same time' (7). An example he gives here, *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), is most pertinent, for in this key early horror film statues indeed seem to be alive, while humans pretend to be statues or else are dead.

Also central to the author's argument in the opening pages, and an

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aspect highlighted by the question of 'artificiality', is the tension/opposition between 'realism' and 'unrealism', with the 'uncanny body' belonging to that aspect of the spectator's apprehension of the filmic text 'in which the unreal and the bodied nature of sound film come across the most forcefully' (11). Referring to the technical problems posed by the introduction of sound in the late 1920s, Spadoni writes: 'Every synchronization mishap served to remind viewers that the bodies speaking on the screen constituted whole entities only tenuously, ones that had been pieced together in a movie studio and that could come apart quite easily once inside the movie theater' (14). His insistence on the Freudian concept of 'The Uncanny' is crucial in two ways. Firstly, the Uncanny occurs when something the subject believed that he or she had left behind at an early stage of existence suddenly and unexpectedly makes its presence felt anew. Secondly, it designates that most disturbing feeling that what the subject knows to be inanimate is seemingly endowed with life. In modern horror cinema, a dramatic instance of this is the sack in the background in Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999). The first time we see it, the sack is simply there in a room, along with an equally motionless character. The second time, for no reason and without the spectator knowing what it contains, it suddenly moves. The co-presence of a motionless human being and an inanimate object that 'comes to life' is truly uncanny, but this feeling was also exploited in the surreal comedies of Frank Tashlin and Jerry Lewis (see the motionless suits of armour that move in the latter's *The Errand Boy* [1961]).

What use, then, does Spadoni make of these insights and observations? A formula that occurs more than once in *Uncanny Bodies* is that of 'speaking effigies', coined by Adorno and Eisler in their 1947 book *Composing for the Films*. For them, the coming of sound did not radically change the use of music, despite the difference between sound films and silent films accompanied by music. Insisting on 'the lack of spatial depth' that is the essence of the image on the screen, they write of characters whose '... bodiless mouths utter words in a way that must seem disquieting to anyone uninformed' (22). 'Disquieting' and 'uninformed': what are we dealing with, thanks to these carefully chosen terms, if not the Uncanny and a form of forgetfulness? For if audiences may have forgotten what (watching) a silent film was like, then clearly something happened in those early years of sound to reactivate a knowledge that did not openly speak its name and that Hollywood was anxious to repress in favour of a belief.

In other words, summing up the implications of what has preceded, it was hardly a coincidence that Hollywood's first two horror movies should concern a character who is one of the living dead (we must not forget that

zombies were not the rage in 1931), and a creation made up of bits and pieces of those who have passed on (I am *not* forgetting that Frankenstein is the creator but simply stressing the fact that only the monster concerns the author). After all, 'effigies' foregrounds the notion of the inanimate appearing to be alive, and this notion is re-activated when critics refer to an actor's performance as 'wooden' or 'lifeless'; language has its little ways of meaning things beyond the conscious purview of the enunciator, as Freud well knew. Intriguingly, in 1990, someone replying to a survey of cinema-going evoked a film of 1928 where '"talking" was of only partial duration... Spooky – hollow sounding voices – larger than life and ghostly. But fascinating' (24).

'Larger than life and ghostly': could we find a better way of describing Count Dracula and Frankenstein's monster? 'The bloodless faces could appear ghostly. Ghostliness suggests a lack of physical substance, the semitransparent wispiness of an apparition' (25). This remark evokes for the current reviewer various recent Asian ghost films where, for example, a person who was not in front of the camera appears, 'semi-transparent', on a photo (the Thai film *Shutter*, 2004) or emerges uncannily from a dark mark on a wall (the Japanese film *Kaïro/Pulse*, 2001). The little matter of Dracula (dis)appearing in a wisp of smoke and his three wives gliding eerily through the crypt goes hand in hand with another factor that Spadoni is one of the few theorists to have raised: if creaking doors and things that go bump in the night are often evoked when discussing sound, the use of *silence* has been less explored. And it is here, of course, that the historical reality of silent cinema returns implacably to make its presence felt.

That Dracula is a bloodless member of the living dead who needs constant human blood – or transfusions – to remain alive, and that the monster is stitched together from lifeless and bloodless body parts, are now part of culture (and folklore). But it takes genuine insight and a keen sense of observation to draw attention to the link between the monster and 'the way human faces in earlier sound films could look: *gray*' (102). 'Now, late in 1931, those faces were not so gray. And so, while the other characters in Whale's film look merely like characters in a black-and-white film, the monster wears the pallid complexion (and bodies forth the unearthly speech) of the figures in earlier sound films' (102). It is just such an incisive observation that enables Spadoni constantly to foreground the uncanny feeling of the supposedly dead past to return to movie theatres showing *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. However, it also gives him the opportunity to reflect on the 'realism/artificiality' dialectic mentioned earlier. Or rather: to transform an ideologically simplistic opposition into a more genuinely materialist theory of film production,

film acting, technology and the act of going to the cinema. This calls for some explanation.

Spadoni neatly – and, I believe, definitively – knocks on the head the inaccurate old cliché about *Dracula* being 'static' and 'uncinematic'. These words, of course, are used to denigrate Browning's considerable achievement, whereas it should not be too difficult to heed the importance of slow movement, with its implications of immobility and hence of *death itself*, in a horror film turning on the living dead. Referring to the confrontation between the Count and Van Helsing where the latter drives the vampire away by brandishing a cross, Spadoni emphasises the way Browning frames the scene and resorts to cuts. Thus Dracula's place in the frame moves from the background, as he advances threateningly towards Van Helsing, to lunging precipitously off-screen right in the foreground when faced with the cross: 'Dracula's forward movement is of the same sort that we might find in a 3-D horror film made in the 1950s' (57). In other words, the film literally foregrounds technique, the mechanical and therefore artificial dimension of the cinema, something that Hollywood strove mightily to hide in the name of a 'realism' that, of course, was the aesthetic equivalent, or by-product, of fetishism. Indeed, *Dracula* affords the spectator a greater realism (as opposed to Hollywood's 'realism') precisely by insisting on mise-en-scène, framing, and cutting.

Likewise, Karloff's make-up and the way he was filmed in *Frankenstein* produced a face which could not but draw attention to its artificiality. But far more than this was at stake in Whale's mise-en-scène, as Spadoni brilliantly shows in his reference to the use of jump cuts whose 'power derives from their jagged abrasiveness' and 'not from any effect of seamlessness'. Thus cutting 'crudely pastes analytical space together in a way that reminds viewers that pieces of film that have been pasted together are constituting the world on view' (106). Thus both the monster and the mise-en-scène become signifiers of the inherent artificiality of film, foregrounding as they do the very filmic process. Here we have the function of fetishism, not in that further Freudian sense evoked by the Uncanny, but rather in the Marxist sense where a presence (the labour needed to produce a given object, here a film) is hidden, driven off-screen as it were, to naturalise and hence to de-historicise film as a cultural, economic and ideological practice. To clarify the issue, here are the words of one of Whale's collaborators, Ted J. Kent (the editor of *The Invisible Man* [1933] and *Bride of Frankenstein* [1935]): 'Whale had a full shot, then a medium, then a chest shot ... I didn't like that. ... to me an introduction of a character in that manner is making the audience conscious of the film element; it reminds them that they are watching a film' (111–12).

Spadoni has already said the same thing but gives it a resoundingly positive sense: 'Whale flaunts the manifestly *built* natures of his film and monster to extraordinary degrees, and the result in each case is not a shambling semblance of a whole but a whole, synthetic, uncanny film body' (109). As he cogently states, *Frankenstein* goes further than *Dracula*, and it is via a profoundly original analysis of speech, voice and silence in Browning's film that he succeeds in highlighting the difference. Referring to the scene where Renfield explains to Van Helsing how the Count appeared to him, Spadoni stresses the fact that, while he relates the events and tells his interlocutor what Dracula promised him, we never actually hear the vampire speak: he just 'appears, silent and motionless...'(69). Thus it is Renfield's words that conjure up Dracula's image 'in a highly mediated fashion'. In this manner, 'The film, at the same time that it is leaning heavily on its strategy of *re-estranging* synchronized speech in order to call back the corpselike quality of human figures on sound film, is working to sever this umbilical link to the earlier cinema' (70).

Spadoni points out that in 1932 both Lugosi and Karloff appeared in films that took up this 'uncanny body modality' at the centre of his thesis: *White Zombie* and *The Mummy* respectively (122–7). But the very special contingencies at work in 1931 to produce this precise phenomenon 'quickly became diluted as producers freely appropriated the *horror* label to sell a wide variety of films' (126). Thus *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, released only a matter of weeks after *Frankenstein* on 31 December 1931, introduces characters and situations in ways that start pushing the genre in other directions. Thanks to Robert Spadoni we can now see and hear *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in a fresh light.