

The Halls of Horror: An Analysis of Set Design in Universal Studios' Horror Films of the  
Early Thirties

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## ABSTRACT

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In the nineteen thirties, Universal Studios invested in the production of a series of horror films that quickly became iconic for the studio and that strongly influenced the development of the horror genre in Hollywood. This series of films was recognized for its visual style, which heavily depended on set design. Through a close analysis of these film sets it is revealed that the style of Universal's horror films is in fact an amalgam of various influences. This study will examine and assess the set design and production history of three major features from this series: *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Black Cat* (1934). This analysis will facilitate an understanding of how the art directors' work was influenced by numerous constraints imposed by the studio mode of production. Their job was to assemble the myriad of stylistic elements suggested by the producers, scriptwriters, directors and other set designers. This thesis will consider the complex variables of how stylistic design can be credited to particular contributors, and, more importantly, the thesis aspires to establish a coherent and comprehensive explanation of what defines a Universal horror film.

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## Introduction

### Universal Studios – A Brief History of the 1920s & 1930s

Carl Laemmle, founder of Universal Studios, was the first Hollywood Mogul to invest in a vast allotment of land for the building of a studio in California. The 230-acre territory of the San Fernando Valley he purchased in 1912<sup>1</sup> was meant to become a “self-sufficient studio-city” (Dick 37). Despite the extent of its real estate, Universal had never been a very competitive studio, especially considering its financial situation. While other majors were constantly expanding, something that was partly due to their investments in theater chains, Laemmle preferred to focus on the construction of a film factory that would serve as a stable location where his films could be shot. Laemmle was not interested in exhibition and he only owned a small chain of theatres. His strategy was to invest in low-budget productions and to produce as many films as possible in the shortest amount of time. He was in fact a businessman more than a film artisan, and he quickly realized the importance of implementing formulas that would facilitate the constant turnover of productions. As Thomas Schatz explains:

[...] motion pictures were expected to be different from one another. Laemmle was convinced that such distinctions could be minimized through a policy of “regulated difference,” so long as certain production values were maintained. Once the production process and story formula were established for, say, Universal’s five-reel westerns with Harry Carey, a competent filmmaker like Jack (later John) Ford could crank them out, often using the same footage for action scenes, with only adjustments in story and character (Schatz 20).

Laemmle was only trying to reach the second-run market and thus was not in search for expansive and spectacular displays. The studio lot was one of the first physical manifestations of his production strategy. During the 1920s, while the others studios were

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<sup>1</sup> The purchase was finally completed in March 1914 at a cost of \$165,000. The city opened its doors a year later, in March 1915.

still in the process of being founded, Universal had already built an impressive number of permanent sets and artificial cities and villages.

Throughout the 1920s, there were persistent debates at Universal that attempted to discover the most successful production strategies. Producer Irving Thalberg, who worked for Laemmle from 1918 to 1923 before moving to MGM, was against the idea of relying primarily on the second-run market and he believed the studio should invest more significantly in A-features.<sup>2</sup> Laemmle was only occasionally willing to invest in big-budget productions, and, even then, they were usually only awarded to filmmakers he privileged.<sup>3</sup> The sets for these films were generally extravagant, with colossal dimensions and excessive ornamentations, and the films usually had to be shot inside the physical limits of the studio in order to allow the producers to maintain a certain control over the productions.

The strategies used for the construction of the sets and the production in general only began to change more significantly in 1929, when Carl Laemmle offered his studio to his son Carl Laemmle Jr. as a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday present. During his first year at the head of the studio, the young producer invested in two major features: *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *King of Jazz*, which both ultimately cost over one million dollars. The publicity for these two films (especially for *The King of Jazz*) strongly emphasized the set design of art directors Hermann Rosse and Charles Hall, which suggests that they were

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<sup>2</sup> I will use the term A-features to describe those big-budget productions, although this term did not exist in the 1930s. During the Golden Era, the average cost for an A-feature was \$400,000, while the average for a B-feature was \$100,000 (Jewell 70).

<sup>3</sup> These filmmakers were usually other German émigrés or family-related people. Laemmle was known for his nepotistic attitude.

considered some of the films' main assets. *All Quiet on the Western Front* became the studio's biggest moneymaker of 1930, while *The King of Jazz* became one of the biggest flops the studio had ever recorded. Despite all of the publicity announced in *Universal Weekly* about the magnificence of the sets, investing in their design had not proved to be an efficient strategy to capture the audience's interest, as it had been the case for the two monster features produced in the previous decade, namely *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). However, these two productions foreshadowed Laemmle Jr.'s focus on sets as a key element to film promotion. This was further supported by his attitude when he began investing in the horror genre.

### **Universal Horror**

Horror was still at an early stage of development in early 1930s Hollywood. The most significant productions of horror had come out of Germany, where the genre had developed its reputation for the unusual Expressionist sets in films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *The Golem* (1920). Those disturbing spaces were designed to represent the characters' disordered and unbalanced mental states; they were designed to physically reproduce mental instability rather than to illustrate realistic and familiar spaces. The Germans had launched the production of a horror cycle that heavily depended on the atmosphere and the strangeness of the locations.

Before the American Studios' Golden Era, horror had not yet really been exploited in Hollywood. At Universal, Carl Laemmle Sr. was not very interested in the genre, and had only invested in a few horror films. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom*

*of the Opera*,<sup>4</sup> which both starred Lon Chaney,<sup>5</sup> had been two of the studio's biggest successes of the decade and they both benefited from some of the most impressive sets ever constructed at Universal. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (one of the last features produced by Thalberg) takes place in a reconstruction of Notre Dame de Paris Cathedral, while *The Phantom of the Opera* is set in a replica of the Opéra de Paris. In both cases, the critics had praised the quality and magnificence of the sets.

After the release of these two films, Universal hired German director Paul Leni to take charge of two features belonging to the horror genre. The first one, *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) was a low-budget haunted house production that did have some Expressionist influences, but did not share a lot with the Gothic style found in the two previous monster features. The sets were designed to enable the casting of large shadows through the utilizations of large spaces, but as a result, they left more space for the lighting and stylized accessories (partitions, chairs, candelabras, etc), which ended up distracting from the sets. Leni's second film related to the genre, *The Man Who Laughs* (1927),<sup>6</sup> had been designed with sets that cleverly mixed Impressionist and Expressionist influences in order to reflect the main character's emotions. The film was not as successful as the two previous starring Lon Chaney, yet many critics noticed the sets, especially in the scene with the hanged men. The horror genre allowed for the elaboration

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<sup>4</sup> These two films are not exclusively associated with the horror genre. Although they are closer to dramas, they do star monster figures, and according to my research, Laemmle Sr. tended to associate them with horror.

<sup>5</sup> Having a big star like Chaney in the production offered a sense of financial safety for the studio.

<sup>6</sup> Like *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Man Who Laughs* was not really a horror feature but its story was about a man with a horrific physical appearance. The film is not classified as horror, yet its main protagonist and its sets share a lot of similarities with the genre.

of remarkable places, and Leni's work demonstrated that there was no need for realism and expansive reconstitution of existing places.

Laemmle Jr.'s first horror feature, *Dracula* (1931) became the first of a whole cycle of horror films, which lasted from 1931 to 1946. Historians and film scholars have divided the cycle in two halves; the first half is associated with Laemmle Jr.'s reign over production (1931-1936), and the second begins with the birth of the "New Universal," headed by J. Cheever Cowdin and Charles R. Rogers.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the first half of the cycle, the studio continuously invested in macabre, highly ornamented Gothic and low-key angular Expressionist sets that showed a strong European influence. Many scholars and historians who have studied Universal's horror films have argued that there really is a consistent style from one film to the other throughout the first horror cycle. My thesis asks: in a film-factory where the elaboration of the sets was shared between an innumerable team of employees, can there possibly be a sense of consistency uniting the style of each film? One name links all of the films that will be under study here: Charles Daniel Hall. Could his presence alone, as art director on each project, be one of the reasons why all Universal horror films of the first cycle share stylistic similarities? Or are these resemblances resultant of Carl Laemmle Jr.'s supervision and his insistence on reusing sets from other films? I will here question the consistency and style associated to Universal's horror films – the "Universal Gothic," as John Hambley and Patrick Downing call it in *The Art of Hollywood: Fifty Years of Art Direction* (46). By looking closely at the sets designed for some of the films produced during the cycle, we can see that in all

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<sup>7</sup> There was a two-year break in the production after the arrival of Cowdin in 1936. The second horror cycle began in 1939 with *Son of Frankenstein*. By the end of the decade, the studio was more financially stable and was able to invest more in their productions.

cases, the on-screen result appears to be more of an amalgam of many different styles. There was actually more than one style associated with each of these features. In order to provide answers to some the interrogations discussed here, many research areas had to be covered.

### **Universal & the Studio System**

After more than one fire at the Universal archives, much of the material concerning the production of these films has been destroyed. The few documents remaining today nonetheless make it possible to analyze some parts of the production of the studio's early films. From the early days of the studio up until 1936, Universal had its own journal publication: *Universal Weekly*. During the 1930s, the two Laemmles wrote editorials in which they discussed the most important news, but also the most significant concerns for their studio. Depending on the attributes of each film, the publicity strategies would often vary. In most cases, there was a strong focus on the stars, but there have been a few instances where the producers clearly focused on the sets, especially after Laemmle Jr.'s arrival. The publication of the magazine was interrupted between June 1930 and October 1932,<sup>8</sup> and as a result, most of the films of the horror cycle did not have the kind of publicity that discussed the producers' investment concerns. Yet there remains some very pertinent information concerning the shooting of *Dracula* and the release of *The Black Cat*. Some of it will be used here to examine how the set design of each film has been elaborated.

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<sup>8</sup> This interruption was due to the studio's financial difficulties. Universal ended up shutting down in March 1931 for a period of four weeks.

Various historical studies offer different ways of understanding how the productions functioned inside the Hollywood studios. Richard F. Dick has studied the division of the work inside Universal's studio-factory and retraced the history of the studio's creation, from the building of Universal City to the late 1990s. This is contained in a book devoted to Universal Studios: *City of Dreams* (1997). The author offers a close study of the construction of the studio lot during the 1910s, from the building of the first ranches, restaurants and hospitals, to the creation of the European village. Furthermore, he examines a number of investments made by the producers.

Thomas Schatz has further explored some of these investments in his book *The Genius of the System* (1988), in which he examines the studio business by focusing on the financial strategies used by MGM, Universal, Warner Bros. and David O. Selznick. Schatz also presents a close study of the production techniques employed during the reign of Laemmle Sr. and Irving Thalberg, and describes the changes implemented at the arrival of Laemmle Jr. as the head of Universal. In his chapters about the early years of Universal, the author compares the size of investments in relation to specific genres and suggests that despite the fact that the studio heavily depended on its production of horror movies during the 1930s, the studio executives were clearly more willing to invest more money in comedies and musicals involving star figures. The art department was left with little money to produce the most grand and atmospheric universes.

## **Production History & Horror**

Because of the division of work in the Hollywood studios and the numerous fragmentations in different departments, it is difficult to determine exact proportions of labor involvement. The study of production material needs to be based on a wide variety of sources, especially when it comes to a field like set design, since it has long been and still remains greatly unexplored. The majority of authors who have written about the films produced by Universal Studios tend to draw continuity between the films of the horror cycle. Tom Weaver, Michael Brunas and John Brunas, devoted an entire book to Universal's two cycles of horror films.<sup>9</sup> In *Universal Horror: The Studio's Classic Films, 1931-1946* (2006), they discuss each of the films and serials made during these two cycles. The authors give an in-depth analysis of each of the films produced and investigate the films' production histories. They also compare the films of the cycle and point out what made the uniqueness of each film. Because the authors choose to look at the films as if they were part of a continuous system, they also attempt to define what elements tended to transition from one film to another. For instance, *The Mummy* (1932) is presented as being more or less a remake of *Dracula* (Weaver and Brunas 32).

Utilizing a similar approach, George E. Turner published a series of articles in which he studied the production contracts and budget sheets of various popular horror films of the 1930s. Turner greatly focuses on the visual style of the films and explores the stylistic overlap that some of the employees tended to implement on successive projects. His articles are edited together in *The Cinema of Adventure, Romance & Terror: From*

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<sup>9</sup> The first horror cycle went from the years 1931 to 1936. After a short break in the production, the second cycle began in 1939.



*the Archives of American Cinematographer* (1989), which also compiles articles by other horror writers who focus on the same period, namely Rudy Behlmer, Michael H. Price, and Paul Mandell: all from *American Cinematographer*.

The work of David J. Skal is among those that contain the most precise historical research about early Hollywood horror. In *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (1993) and *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (1990), Skal examines the different spheres of production, carefully assessing the contracts of the artists who worked on the various projects. He also examines the material left from the productions such as interviews with the actors, producers' notes and personal correspondence between studio employees, and examines the composition of some of the film's shots. While the first book is an in depth examination of the visual representations of horror, the second mainly focuses on the evolution of *Dracula*, from the novel to the stage, and from the stage to the screen.

Most of the remaining archival material about Universal Studios' horror films was edited together by Philip J. Riley in his *MagicImage Filmbooks* series (1989-1993). Each volume focuses on one individual film and presents a collection of rare archival documents, including many different versions of the scripts, reviews, articles and sketches drawn by the various art directors who worked on each film. Riley does not attempt to find resemblances between films, but rather tries to explain the development of each production individually.

Brian Taves' article *Universal's Horror Tradition* (1987) is a key text that opened many doors for alternative understandings of the style of Universal's horror features. It brings a close study of the production, and focuses on the contribution brought by cinematographer Karl Freund and director Robert Florey (*Murders on the Rue Morgue* (1932)). Taves discusses how Florey and Freund incorporated a European aspect in their projects and how the producers and other employees of the studio reutilized this aspect in their subsequent films. Taves was also Robert Florey's biographer. In this article – and also in his biography of Florey – he insists on recognizing Florey for more than what he has been credited for. According to Taves, after the making of *Rue Morgue*, "later horror films at Universal and elsewhere (including those directed by Whale), owe more to the example of *Rue Morgue* than to *Frankenstein*" (Taves 1987, 47). This is due to the fact that Florey was working in collaboration with his cinematographers, scriptwriters and art directors.

Biographical works provide other ways of looking at the production of the horror cycle and the films' belonging to a particular studio style. Various biographies written about the directors and actors of these films tend to focus on the continuity of a director's body of work. It is the case of James Curtis' biography of James Whale, *A New World of Gods and Monsters* (1998), that presents a close study of the director's personal interests in filmmaking and the recurrences between each of his films. Curtis bases a part of his research on the production and reception of the films. The author also examines the various contracts signed with the Laemmles and the relationships between the employees working at the studio, namely Karl Freund, John P. Fulton and Charles Hall. The

biography of actor Béla Lugosi written by Arthur Lennig, *The Immortal Count* (2003), also stands out for its extent and the precision of research. Lennig's research provides a great amount of information about the division of work inside the studio. Lugosi was one of the key figures at Universal during the first horror cycle, and his career heavily depended on his relationship with the directors and the other important actors working on the same projects. There is no suggestion that Lugosi could have been an author, yet the resemblance of the different characters he performed establishes a certain coherency across his entire filmography.

### **Art Direction Studies**

Today, set design remains largely ignored by film scholarship. A few American and European art directors authored the first writings about set design in motion pictures in an attempt to demystify their profession by explaining the different tasks to which they were assigned. Ben Carré was among the earliest and most prolific art directors to write about his profession. He began writing his memoirs in France in the early 1910s and chronicled his film work throughout his entire career. His writing unfortunately never had any impact on techniques of set design or on film scholarship because it mostly revolves around Carré's personal experience and remains unpublished.<sup>10</sup> The contribution of his writing remains important for its explanation of techniques utilized by set designers who worked during the early years of cinema.

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Carré's memoirs are now available at the Margaret-Herrick Library, and are part of the special collections.

Joseph Urban and Cedric Gibbons write on the importance of art directors. Urban developed the notion of the “super art director,” a term suggesting that an art director who was involved in all the different aspects of art direction deserved all the credit for the design of the sets. Cedric Gibbons, who was the head of MGM’s art department, had a similar influence on the recognition of the work of the art director. One of his articles about his profession published in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* attempts to highlight and clarify some of the subtleties of the profession. Both Urban and Gibbons helped the recognition of the art director by arguing that he was responsible for almost everything that appears on screen, but they consequently dismissed the roles of other set designers. In their attempt to gain more recognition for their work, they ended up distorting the reality of their profession. Early writings about art direction tended to follow Gibbons’ point of view. An article by Morton Eustis published in *Theatre Arts* in 1937 presents Gibbons as responsible for everything that appears on screen in all of the films he was credited for. Although Eustis mentions the presence of set designers and the important collaboration of scriptwriters and directors, he clearly overvalues Gibbons’ work by suggesting that he was collaborating with the director and scriptwriter on every project. Considering the extent of Gibbon’s filmography, which includes over a thousand films in a thirty-year period, it would have been impossible for him to maintain this degree of collaboration. It must yet be noted that during the studio era, the glamorous Art Deco style prevailing in Hollywood was of major importance for the architecture and interior design industry, and that following Gibbons approach and MGM’s extravagance, the work of the art director started to gain a certain prestige. These types of articles are still very relevant today for the information they offer on set design. It is however necessary

to understand how the profession sometimes tends to be overvalued, and this is why the following analysis of Universal horrors' set design will not only be about the work of Charles Hall but mostly about his collaboration with other artists working in team with him.

Studies devoted to art direction in Hollywood began to appear more significantly by the mid-1980s. Donald Albrecht is one of the most prolific authors who has written about Hollywood art direction during the studio era. His articles are published in design magazines such as *Architectural Digest* and *2wice Magazine*, and compiled in joint publications on set design, most notably in Mark Lamster's *Architecture and Film* (2001) and Alain Masson's *Hollywood 1927-1941* (1991). His most complete work on the subject is *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (1986). In his writings, Albrecht goes far beyond the observation of sets and explores the relationship between Hollywood, Art Deco fashion and consumerism. Seeing the importance of this relationship between fashion in film and consumerism, it is surprising to see that a studio facing a financial crisis like Universal would prefer to invest in Gothic and Expressionist sets rather than in Art Deco. Before the horror cycle, the studio had in fact made one particular attempt to invest in very modern and unusual sets, but as mentioned earlier, *The King of Jazz* ended up being one of the studio's biggest failures, both critically and financially, and although the film won an Academy Award in 1930 for Best Art Direction, there was no evidence that modern sets were necessarily an efficient way of attracting the public.

Apart from Art Deco, there were many other important styles of set design in vogue inside the major studios during Hollywood's Golden Era. Beverly Heisner has taken a close look at the various styles predominant in each of the major studios between 1925 and 1950 in her book *Hollywood Art* (1990) and has discussed how each of the studios were investing different types of stylistics (Gothic, Modern, Expressionist, Art Deco) and how they were still able to develop their own specific studio style. To support this idea, Heisner emphasizes the importance of collaboration between writers, directors and set designers, who were all working together under the direction of the same producers. According to her, "part of the scenic formulae of Universal's horror films is a vastness of scale – furniture, fireplaces, wall ornaments, shadows on walls all must be oversized" (291). These oversized elements all began to appear with *Dracula*.

For Juan Antonio Ramírez, all the different popular trends found in motion pictures of the studio era seemed to have had their own specific purpose and logical reason to exist. In *Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood's Golden Age* (2004), he goes further into the analysis of the achievements of set designers working in Hollywood by offering a critical perspective of what was happening on and behind the screen. Ramírez explores the reasons why specific types of sets, not only Art Deco but also more exotic or medieval sets, were in vogue during the Golden Age. Unlike Heisner, he moves away from the definition of the individual styles associated to each of the studio by looking at the dominant tendencies adopted throughout. Ramírez's work draws a line between Universal's Gothic Medieval and with the way the other studios tended to adopt a similar style for the production of their horror

features. According to him, the sets of Universal horror films from the thirties and forties were all overtly medieval, except for *Frankenstein* (137), which had a more distinguished style.

### **Architecture and Stylistics**

Art Deco design was a major influence on the development of art direction in 1930s Hollywood. As it was mentioned in the description of Albrecht's work, architecture magazines emphasized the fact that the *nouveau riches* wanted to possess the same furniture as that of their favorite movie stars. This concern also functioned in a sort of reverse-osmosis, as the dream factory's most renowned art directors were heavily influenced by the modern architectural trends and popular interior designs.

Despite the prevalence of Art Deco in fashion and interior design, Universal's art department clearly countered the trend. Gothicism and Expressionism are the two most influential styles concerning the work of Universal's set designers at the beginning of the cycle. To fully understand the styles expressed by the sets of these films, it is also necessary to look at the various architectural styles that influenced them. Erwin Panofsky's *Architecture and Scholasticism* (1974), a short but concise book on Gothic architecture, has been a key text for this research, mostly because of the way it defines the ideologies behind the development of the architectural style. Elements of Gothicism are found in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, but clearly, it was transformed and modified by the studio's art department.

German Expressionism also had a major influence on Universal's art department, especially for the set design of *Frankenstein*. Siedfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner's writings on German Expressionist set designs and their effects on the viewer's perception of the characters' psychology are important to consider in order to understand the way in which these sets influenced Universal's horror features. As it will be discussed here, the influence of European artistic styles was not as important as some authors have noted, yet they must be considered in order to comprehensively understand these set designs. Anthony Vidler's work on architecture goes even further into defining ways in which the specific organizations of space can influence the human psyche. In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), Vidler studies the use of architecture in horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann in order to reveal the specificities of their settings and the causes of the uncanny feeling they evoke. Vidler incorporates Freud's ideas on the *unheimlich* (uncanny) in order to support his ideas.

Throughout Universal's horror cycle, set design subtly moved away from Gothicism and German Expressionism, and progressed towards the much more popular modern fashion styles like Art Deco. The work of Lucy Fischer has been helpful to define how these styles were incorporated with some of those films. In *Designing Women* (2003), Fischer describes how since *Metropolis* (1927), Art Deco has often been associated with the evil woman. The influence of modern design and architecture will be discussed in the last chapter of this research, which focuses on the only exclusively modern horror film ever produced at Universal: *The Black Cat*. The work of Tom Wolfe



on the Bauhaus has also been very important for this chapter in order to understand how these architectural influences are reflected in the film's sets.

## **Conclusion**

The factory-like division of work did not change after Laemmle Jr.'s arrival as the head of the studio and the division of the tasks between the employees remained unclearly defined. When the time came to assess which strategies were the best to adopt for set design, there was always a part of the employees that was looking for something new, while others wanted to perpetuate the tradition and use designs similar to those made for previous films. The art department maintained the same employees, but each new director brought something of a personal touch. Tod Browning and Charles Hall liked Gothicism, while Leni and Whale preferred Expressionism and Ulmer focused on Bauhaus.

At the beginning of the cycle, Laemmle Jr. tended to follow his instinct and impulses and did not worry about the most popular trends in set design. Despite the popularity of modern architecture and interior design and despite the public's interest, the young producer believed in the styles that had been more traditionally associated with the horror genre. Clearly, the set designers had trouble finding their focus on one style that should dominate the screen.

By looking closely at Universal's films from the first horror cycle, each final result appears to be much closer to an amalgam of many different styles. I chose to look at three specific films of the first half of the cycle: the two earliest ones, *Dracula* (1931)

and *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Black Cat* (1934), the film that stands out of the cycle more significantly because of its style. My goal is to understand how the set designers proceeded and to what extent Charles Hall collaborated with the directors and scriptwriters. Finally, I intend to look at the ways in which financial constraints imposed by the producers affected the set designs.

## Chapter 1

### Dracula – The Contemporary Ruins

*Dracula*, the first film of Universal's horror cycle, had a major impact on the visual style of the studio's subsequent horror productions. In his study of Hollywood art direction, Juan Antonio Ramírez states that *Dracula* (1931) is the film that introduced "the definitive identification of a Gothic architectural style with cinematic terror [...], where the ruined castle full of spider webs is unmistakably 'ogive.'" (Ramírez 137). Elements of Gothicism can be found in some earlier horror features, but there was something about this first sound horror that made its set design more noticed. This particular use of the Gothic style influenced many other horror films throughout the rest of the decade. According to Beverly Heisner, "variations of themes found in the décor of *Dracula* recur with regularity in subsequent Universal's [sic] horror films" (289). *Dracula* is often seen as the starting point of a cycle of Gothic horror, not only because it was the first sound horror, but also because of what it brought to the genre in terms of style.

The pointed arches and charged ornamentation found in the dark and gigantic Transylvanian castle clearly refer to medieval cathedrals. However, these components do not make up the entirety of visual motifs that characterize *Dracula*, nor are the motifs limited to the Gothic tradition. A great number of the production staff participated in the design (scriptwriters, producers, director and art directors) and made suggestions which set designers were compelled to incorporate into the film. If critics have only rarely pointed out the amalgamation of two different styles in *Dracula* – Gothic and

contemporary – it is because the set designers have employed different strategies to combine those two styles in a way that affects the narrative. In order to understand the film’s combination of Gothic and contemporary design, it is first important to understand the film’s production history.

### **Financing a First Horror Feature**

*Dracula* was made during a time when Universal’s producers were facing their first serious financial crisis. The studio executives sought a safe investment that would assure Universal’s return to a state of economic security. For a long time, Laemmle Jr. had considered adapting Hamilton Deane’s stage play based on Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*. MGM also had an interest in the adaptation, and Jr. and his father saw this competition as an indicator of the project’s potential. They chose to invest a major budget for the making of this new feature despite Universal’s financial insecurity.<sup>11</sup> The rights for the cinematic adaptation were bought for the reasonable amount of \$40,000. The film was given an original budget of \$355,050 for a thirty-six-day shooting schedule, which made it one of the studio’s major investments in 1931.<sup>12</sup>

The screen credits for Art Direction were attributed to one of the rising figures of Universal's Art Department: Charles Hall. Though they also worked on the set design, Herman Rosse and John Hoffman were left uncredited. The extent of Hoffman and Rosse’s contributions remains obscure considering the little production information

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Laemmle Senior was still loosely involved in the productions of Universal Studios although he had relegated the studio to his son. Sr. was actually quite reluctant to invest in a horror film.

<sup>12</sup> After the failure of *King of Jazz* in 1929, the studio decided to cease making productions that would go above \$300,000.00. *Dracula* was the first film with a budget above that limit. It was an enormous investment for Universal, although compared to the regular investments made by the other major studios, it was in fact very reasonable.

available today. It is however possible to understand how the producers and scriptwriters influenced the set designers by examining the evolution of the script.

For *Dracula*, Charles Hall organized the filmic interiors in such a way that would constantly influence or dictate the positioning of the characters. Throughout the film, the sets were designed to reflect the presence of Dracula and to put him in a position of power, especially because of the use of staircases. The connection between interiors and exteriors reinforced the consistency of the film style. This task was inevitably constrained by various restrictions imposed by the producers in order to make, what they deemed, a visually interesting but relatively financially restrained film. The budget was large enough for the design of a few costly and spacious sets, but most of them would need to be designed with modest means, and a few others would need to be recycled from previous horror films. Hall's answer to these constraints was to incorporate recurrent uncanny motifs that would serve to maintain a certain stylistic consistency.

### **Designing an Adaptation**

For their cinematic adaptation of *Dracula*, Universal's executives originally planned to combine both the Bram Stoker novel and the Hamilton Deane stage play. Fritz Stephani was hired to write the first treatment, from which only very little remains in the actual film. Louis Bromfield was the first person in charge of writing a screenplay combining both texts (Skal 1990, 165),<sup>13</sup> a version that remained more similar to Stoker's novel. In *The Hollywood Gothic*, Skal asserts that Bromfield's ideas for the design of the castle's

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<sup>13</sup> Fritz's treatment will not be analyzed here since practically nothing remains from it in the film version.

sets were far too ambitious for the studio's financial resources.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the decision was made to remove Bromfield from the project – a solution that confirmed the film adaptation would have more affinities with the stage version than with the novel. Writer Garrett Fort was hired to write a screenplay that would use fewer settings, and that would therefore require a smaller number of sets. This screenplay would also have to include more scenes set in everyday London. The different versions of the screenplay that appear in Philip J. Riley's script compilation all confirm that the changes made in the various drafts tended to bring the film closer to the stage play. Like in Deane's variant, the story was re-located to contemporary apartments of the late 1920s. In the end, all of these location changes were not made in order to garner distinction from the novel, but rather to save on the expenses of more spacious and ornamented Gothic sets.

The film still contains many characteristics reminiscent of the Gothic style described in Stoker's novel, but in response to the producers' demands, the majority of the sets had to be designed in tightly contained interiors rather than in large cavernous spaces. The décors thus appear to be divided in two different styles, both objectifying a duality and fractioning two worlds – the world of the evil Count, and the everyday life of Mina, Jonathan and the other human characters. Both of these realities appear as if they were taking place in two different time periods: one made out of old ruins filled with dust and cobwebs, and the other of contemporary fashionable interiors.

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<sup>14</sup> According to Skal, the point of hiring Bromfield was “most likely to study the cost-saving possibilities of the stage version over the book.” (Skal 1990, 168)

The script's final version dating from September 26, 1930 clearly shows that the scriptwriters were considering only one of these two styles of sets: the one designed for Count Dracula. It indeed contains many descriptions of the castle and abbey sets, while only very little is said about Lucy and Mina's modern apartments. Most of the descriptions focus on the materials (props, ruins, decay) and on the atmosphere (lighting, fog) of the sets. The screenplays also attempt to determine which sets were to be reused from previous features in order to reduce expenses – a specification that had been required by the producers.<sup>15</sup> The decision left to the set designers was how to organize the space, which apart from the mention of the castle's high ceiling and the vastness of its hall, was not described in any of the scripts.

The press book distributed to promote the film also reinforces the evidence that the producers believed primarily in the effectiveness of the Gothic castle and crypt-like undergrounds. Their promotional strategy, which was to describe in detail the Gothic atmosphere and to make abstraction of the modern look of the film (see fig. 1.1), suggests that the producers believed that maintaining a Gothic style was the safest way to guarantee the success of the film. The design of the Gothic and medieval sets generally represented important investments because they had to be built in large spaces and were charged with massive and detailed ornamentations. The style moreover perpetuated the horror film tradition already introduced by Universal. It offered the possibility of reusing

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<sup>15</sup> The only two comments written on Laemmle's script of September 8, 1930, aside from a note concerning the removal of the word "looney," were that the sets had to be reused and that the locations were originally not mentioned. According to Riley, Laemmle's comments show that "there is a strong indication that financial pressures from the New York office were starting to win over the artistic desires of Jr." (*MagicImage Filmbooks Presents Dracula: The Original 1931 Shooting Script*, 56).

sets and props taken from the studio's previous monster movies, namely *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)<sup>16</sup>.

Quite the opposite, the modern and more modest interiors were of no interest to the producers apart from their affordability – their common appearance and smaller proportions allowing them to be designed with fewer resources and reused materials. Although the popularity of modern set designs during the thirties could have served as a way to promote the film in interior design magazines,<sup>17</sup> the studio did not attempt to exploit that aspect and preferred to focus on cutting down expenses.

### **Familiar Transylvanian Spaces**

The first scene of the film, the trip to Transylvania, was entirely shot in pre-existing sets found on Universal's backlot. The introduction of Gothic set design is only made once Renfield crosses the threshold of the castle: a gigantic hall dimly lit by moon rays penetrating the wire netted window. The vast space extends, reflecting the sublime dimension of a menacing, unknown infinity. In this room, an additional glass matte was added to magnify the proportions of the hall already filled up with an eighteen-foot-wide cobweb (Skal 1990, 182) (see fig. 1.2). Following the style of the Gothic cathedral seen in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the set extends to agoraphobic dimensions with the disappearance of the walls in the obscure matte added on the upper half. The matte serves to project the walls into a limitless dimension, as the drawing erases the borders imposed

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<sup>16</sup> This strategy, which was in common usage in the Hollywood studios, usually consisted of taking the sets from a major picture and dressing them differently in order to be used in a small-budget feature.

<sup>17</sup> Art Deco sets seen in Hollywood films were often used to promote the new fashion style in interior design catalogs. Using those kinds of modern sets could therefore have been an interesting strategy for the studios to promote their films.



by the ceiling. The enormous proportions have the effect of diminishing Renfield, who, surrounded by an immense structure and cloistered at the bottom of the imperial L-shaped staircase, appears to be the size of an insect. The Count escapes the dwarfing effect imposed on Renfield because he is positioned on a higher level of the staircase. Here for the first time, Dracula is introduced as a superior entity by the way in which he physically dominates the room, remaining at the top of the staircase. Despite its massive structure, the hall is built in a way that suggests a sense of permeability, as if the towering walls could not protect Renfield from the menacing dangers outside. This is explained by the conversation between Dracula and his guest, which introduces the Count's affinity with the creatures of the night. The naked tree branches entering the room through the fenced windows (fig.1.3) introduce this complimentary relationship between the interior and exterior, which remains visible throughout the entire film.

Strangely recalling the entrance hall, the castle's guestroom ends in a gigantic wire-netted window that forms the rear extremity of the room. The set is organized in a way that diminishes and isolates Renfield in a corner, while it allows the Count to move freely within the space. Renfield appears to be confined behind the table, completely isolated, sitting in front of a massive curtain that entraps him and that destroys all perspective behind (see fig. 1.4).<sup>18</sup> His movement is limited, and he never goes beyond the first half of the room. The doors open autonomously for Dracula but they prevent Renfield from reaching the outside. This room, which has been criticized for being "incomprehensibly large," (Heisner 1990, 289) introduces one of the key elements of the

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<sup>18</sup> This technique is similar to that seen in *The Man Who Laughs* (1927), where Gwynplaine is often entrapped, surrounded by opaque curtains. The fabrics often appear to be transcribing the character's emotions.

entire set design of *Dracula*: the persistent imbalance. While one part of the room has been extended to cathedral-like dimensions giving a sense of depersonalization to the space, the opposite part consists of a restrained, imprisoning corner. The lack of equilibrium serves to emphasize the disturbed nature of the vampire's world, and supports Renfield's alienation from it. Everything in the room is built in a way that eases the Count in his displacements and that emphasizes his superior stature, while Renfield remains trapped in a small corner for most of the scene. The scene ends when Dracula leaves the room, as the door magically opens itself in response to his approach.

### **The Uncanny Echo of the London Spaces**

In contrast to the enormous proportions found in the Transylvanian castle, the London sets are much more restrained. When Dracula arrives in London, the set's change of style, at first, appears drastic. However, as the film progresses, the sets begin to reveal specific motifs that serve to reactivate the uncanny thematic evoked by the Gothic environment. Following the tradition of haunted houses and uncanny architecture as described by Anthony Vidler, a place pretending to offer security opens itself to the intrusion of terror (Vidler 1992, 11), as in the first scene in which the Count infiltrates Mina's living room. It begins with a long shot revealing only the right corner of the room. Mina and Jonathan sit on a couch, surrounded by flower bouquets and patterns (fig. 1.5), while the left part of the room is left unseen. Van Helsing and the servant slowly descend the staircase behind them and enter the room within the same framing. Dracula moves to the left as he arrives, thus revealing the left section of the set, which is isolated from the other part by a column positioned at the back, dividing the room between the new guest and the other

characters. Similar to the castle's guestroom, the sets are built in a way that divides the space in sections associated to specific characters. Again, the space is unbalanced: Dracula's section is empty compared to the other parts of the room. In Mina and Jonathan's section, the background is filled with flower motifs and a fire burning, while behind Van Helsing is a massive bookshelf. With assurance, Dracula walks through the space and exits by the patio. The three men remain paralyzed, frozen by fear in the living room, unable to go further than the balcony, while the count rejoins the creatures of the night. From the beginning to the end of the scene, Dracula simply transcends the room to leave all human characters completely terrorized. His leaving by the patio reveals an aperture in this last section of the set, in such a way that opens up the closed and safe place into an open passage. As the scene progresses, the room gradually becomes unbalanced, revealing its unevenness in response to Dracula's entrance.

The general definition of the uncanny also applies when a familiar place suddenly becomes unfamiliar. In this particular scene, these strange qualities are also found in the way the room is marked by the invader's presence. While the entirety of Dracula's castle is marked by cobwebs and fog reflecting his relation with the outside world and the nightly creatures, Mina's living room is only partly characterized by her presence. There is a particular decoration that more succinctly represents Dracula: he stands in front of a large portrait and a miniature ship. The old painting recalls the castle's agedness and massive decorations, while the ship evokes the mode of transportation in which the Count was previously seen. Mina's safety is further questioned by the presentation of doors: while the scene begins in what seems to be an ordinary closed boudoir only accessible

from inside the mansion, the departure of the Count reveals a door on the left side and an opening on the balcony outside.

There are many balconies in Mina's residence, but none of them feature a deep exterior background. When the characters stand on the balcony, it seems as if nature forms a wall against them, bordering them with encumbering bushes and trees. In the previously described scene in Mina's living room, the Count easily leaves by the balcony, but when the other characters stand outside, they stop at the doorframe, immobilized as if an unknown force was keeping them from going further. Only Dracula can easily make the transition between outside and inside. He is free to join his nightly creatures and enters the apartment without any difficulty, while the others remain bound inside.

### **Staircases and Passages**

One of the most prominent characteristics of the sets – something that also marked Universal's subsequent horror films – is the extensive use of staircases. In this particular film, these mostly serve to put Dracula in a dominating position, while his victims appear to be in an inferior position. One of the characteristics of this use of elevations is that it sometimes appears to be clearly symbolic and artificial. In fact, the staircases often seem to lead nowhere. Dracula is often positioned at the top of staircases, especially when he is in his own domain, where he oversees the vast, empty spaces. However, this is not always achieved in a logical way.

In the first scene in the underground of the Transylvanian castle, during the introduction of the character, Dracula moves toward a staircase and slowly begins to climb. Strangely, the count stops after the first five or six steps and remains immobile until the camera cuts to the next shot. This interruption clearly suggests that only a small section of the staircase was built. Its presence seems very odd because it clearly leads nowhere. However, it plays an important role in the understanding of the space and the stature of the character. Conversely, Renfield is always at the bottom of staircases. His entrance to the castle is executed by confronting the end of the gigantic L-shaped staircase. The entirety of the set is built to support these positions. The locations of the entrances dictate the place where the characters will appear in the room.

The numerous entrances surrounding each set also influence the positioning of the characters and privilege that of the Count's. Dracula often finds an entrance or an exit that only he has access to, while the other characters have no other choice but to use alternate exits or to remain imprisoned inside the rooms. For instance, in the final chase, when the count kidnaps Mina, Dracula enters the Abbey from the top of the stairs. Arriving from the outside, Renfield subsequently enters the room, but through a different door located at the bottom of the stairs. The subordinate climbs up to meet his master three-quarters of the way up, only to be pushed to the bottom. Van Helsing and Jonathan then enter the room through the same, lower door, once again on a level that emphasizes their position of inferiority in relation to the Count.

## **Underground of the Uncanny**

Throughout the film, numerous characteristics of the sets echo elements previously seen: the openings on the exterior, the ship reappearing in Mina's living room and the constant presence of staircases. It is mostly toward the end of the film that this strange echo really finds its meaning in the reuse of the set of the Transylvanian castle's underground to represent different locations.

Although the underground set is hard to recognize in its second appearance, it was quite audacious to use it twice within this new feature. However the reappearance of the castle's underground by the end of the film in the Carfax Abbey, the refuge of the Count in London, is carefully introduced after a series of sets gradually recalling the Transylvanian decors. In fact, towards the end of the film, the sets progressively begin to reflect other previously seen locations. The count's refuge in London shares obvious similarities with the Transylvanian castle. Like in the original residence, the stairs descend in an L-shape that meets its end on the right side of the frame, and a pointed arch covers the wall below (see fig. 1.2 and 1.6). The dusty labyrinthine underground is filled with cobwebs, and the walls are also made of the same grubby bricks. Everything in this cave is made to recall the castle's entrance, in a way that evokes a sense of *déjà vu*. Here again, the sets were designed to evoke an uncanny theme. They recall the film's earlier Gothic design, abandoned for the modern London world: this feeling is further enhanced by the actual reuse of the set found in the last section of the abbey's underground. The uncanny feeling creates its most influential effect in this concluding sequence where the

sets become familiar but remain hardly recognizable, and once again makes the economical alternatives serve the atmosphere of the film.

## **Conclusion**

*Dracula* has been heavily criticised for its staginess. The film is indeed very static in terms of characters' and camera movements, but the way each character moves inside different framings only serves to fully exploit the possibilities offered by the design of the sets. In the Spanish version of the film,<sup>19</sup> the characters often move differently, but the effect of domination and the uncanny theme is maintained because most of the displacements are dictated by the sets. The powers of the evil Count are reflected through the high ceilings of his mansion, which lose themselves in the infinity suggested by the obscure glass matte, and through the way he physically dominates the space. When his grandeur is not expressed through this verticality, it is reflected in the vast abysmal undergrounds that extend into a decaying infinity.

This desire to illustrate the dominance of the Count supports the producer's decision to emphasize and exaggerate the Count's residences. Conversely the victims live in restrained and unsafe places. As Sennett describes in his analysis of Hall's art direction, "this fits in with the different levels of morality with which Hall has invested his architectural settings – contemporary being the most heavenly; rustic neither good nor bad, like purgatory; and High Gothic being the most evil" (Sennett, 89). On the same note, Brian Dunbar affirms that: "[the] sets in London do not dwarf the characters. The

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<sup>19</sup> During the shooting of *Dracula*, a Spanish team of artists were working on a similar version, which was shot during the night.

overall effect is to associate the world of the vampire with the past and the supernatural while the London scenes are very much of the present and belong to the world of reason and science” (41). This division between the two different styles clearly finds meaning in the story, but, evidently, this was not resultant of the producers’ motivations to establish a stylistic coherency.

Was the decision to focus on some specific portions of the sets a mistake of the producers? According to the critics of the time, the modern sets were one of the film’s main flaws. They were not appreciated and were criticized for the apparent banality of their design, which Heisner calls “conventional” (289), and they have been criticized in numerous studies of Universal’s set design. Spadoni affirms that: “For decades, *Dracula* has occupied a low place on the critical landscape of the horror film. The consensus has long been that the film represents a major disappointment and missed opportunity” (Spadoni, 46). A *Hollywood Filmograph* review from April 4, 1931 mentions that: “the action should have taken place in the period of which it was written – with crowded, ugly architecture” (Unknown, 20). But these critical reactions against the modern, somehow ordinary décors, and criticisms of what the film “should be,” suggest a certain lack of open-mindedness of the critics. The producers could however still be accused of their non-strategic investments. Because of the budget’s lack of balance, the modern set designs are not as notable as the grandiose Gothic castle. The more elaborate sets somehow erase the existence of the contemporary. Moreover, some elements like the cardboard added above the light in Mina’s bedroom to block the light source (see fig. 1.7) clearly reflect the studio’s lack of interest in a certain part of the film, especially when



being compared to the castle's grandiose sets blown up with the use of mattes.

Furthermore, many mistakes were made in the building of the sets. Two staircases were built for the abbey's underground, although only one was necessary,<sup>20</sup> and \$5,000 was spent on the design of the miniature of the castle (Skal 1990, 186), which only appears for a few seconds during the film.

*Dracula's* sets have however introduced some of the main characteristics that were to become persistent at Universal's Art Department throughout the entire horror cycle. The crypts and curtains were already strong reminders of previous features (when not directly taken from them), and the use of staircases and doorframes, which thematize the characters, remained recurrent elements. But what begins to be particularly evident in *Dracula*, and what also later became a part of Universal's signature, is the overt artificiality of the sets. Arthur Lening explains:

Dracula begins with a shot of a coach moving among the precipitous peaks of Transylvania. Needless to say [*sic*], the actual region is not so stark and bare and, in fact, is deeply forested, but the Hollywood film, if not topographically and horticulturally correct, does create an appropriate area where peasants are fearful, where castles harbor fluttering denizens of the night, and where such creatures as vampires might conceivably exist (Lening, 103).

Despite all of its flaws and inequalities, for the producers, set designers and art director, *Dracula* became a model to follow for subsequent films. Although, clearly, the importance of uniting the different styles found in the set design became a more important concern in the following film. As will be taken up in the next chapter, each film of the horror cycle introduced its own specific predominant style, but this style was always mixed with other influences, and the consistency between each distinct style remained a major concern for the art directors throughout the first cycle of horror.

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<sup>20</sup> The second staircase appears briefly in the Spanish version.



## Chapter 2

### Frankenstein – The Expressionist Towers

The production of *Frankenstein* (1931), Universal Studio's second film of the horror cycle, began shortly after the release of *Dracula*. Before knowing whether or not the first film would be a critical or box-office success, the producers were already willing to start a new horror project with similar themes that utilized the Gothic tradition. Considering *Frankenstein* the novel emerged from the romantic tradition, it is not very surprising to see elements of Gothic architecture reflected in the set design of its cinematic adaptation. Like *Dracula*, this film would have a slightly different visual style from what was associated with the novel: one that would have a stronger expressionist influence. Frenchman Robert Florey, the first director assigned to the project, was influenced more so by European filmmaking than the director of *Dracula*. According to Florey's biographer Brian Taves,

Florey's conception for a film of *Frankenstein* was derived from the tradition of German expressionism; his enormous debt to this style exceeded that of many of the German emigres themselves. Preferring F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) to Universal's *Dracula*, Florey set out to make a horror film in the continental spirit, rather than the Anglo-American school (Taves 1987, 37).

These original intentions were however rapidly modified as the production developed. With a new director and new scriptwriters, the project quickly became an amalgamation of competing styles. The film's aesthetics became a mixture of Gothicism and expressionism, and Florey's contribution remained apparent within the project. Carl Laemmle Jr. supported the making of this new film and believed that a new horror feature starring Bela Lugosi would be enough to confirm his evolving status as the new Lon

Chaney (Lennig 2003, 139)<sup>21</sup> and to guarantee a box office success for the studio.<sup>22</sup> After considering various adaptations, including *The Invisible Man* and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the choice was made to adapt the stage play based on Mary Shelley's novel (Taves 1987, 124) and the rights for the screenplay adaptation were bought on April 8, 1931 (Skal 1990, 128). French director Robert Florey was hired along with Garrett Fort, who had previously worked on *Dracula*, and Richard Schayer, head of Universal's story department. Florey focused on story while Fort was responsible for dialogue. The screenplay, which was approved by Laemmle Jr. on July 12, 1931, gave extremely precise descriptions of the sets and the general atmosphere the film should attempt to evoke.

At the time of this early script's approval, the studio executives were uncertain about investing, but Florey nevertheless decided to direct a first screen test without the producers' approval.<sup>23</sup> Whether Laemmle Jr. was satisfied with the footage or not remains unclear: photographer Paul Ivano recalled that Laemmle Jr. had a favorable reaction and replayed the test multiple times at the studio (Lennig, 145). However, according to James Curtis' personal correspondence with the producer, Laemmle Jr. later stated the test "wasn't very good" (Curtis, 132). Shortly after, Laemmle decided to remove Florey and

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<sup>21</sup> Lugosi was the first actor to be considered to play the role of the monster. According to Lennig, after seeing the box office success of *Dracula*, Laemmle Jr. started gambling that audiences wanted more horror pictures and began to look for other vehicles that would use Lugosi's unexpected fame. He believed that the Hungarian actor would become the new "man of a thousand faces" (139).

<sup>22</sup> The Laemmles had a particularly strong belief in the star-genre formula and the star-system's influence on box office receipts. Carl Laemmle Sr. has been considered as the "inventor of stars" and believed that "[t]he production of the stars [was] a prime necessity in the film industry" (2005, 112). This belief was clearly reflected in Laemmle Jr.'s attitude towards Lugosi during his first years at the studio, and later with Boris Karloff.

<sup>23</sup> The decision to make a screen test was not approved by Laemmle Jr. By the time it was shot, the choice of the director still hadn't been assigned (Curtis, 132). The contract signed by Florey on April 8 did not specify on which film he would be working. In July 1931, he was transferred to the project of *Rue Morgue*.

Lugosi from the project, thinking a director who had been more successful in the past would be more competent.

Laemmle Jr. had a closer relationship with James Whale, who had previously directed *Journey's End* (1930) and *Waterloo Bridge* (1931) at Universal, and was more comfortable with him as head of this major production than he was with Florey. Whale signed the contract for *Frankenstein* in July 1931 and was asked to rearrange the screenplay with Garrett Fort and Francis Edward Faragoh. With an initial budget of \$262,000, *Frankenstein* became a major investment for the studio in 1931.

### **The Stylistic Guideline**

Although Florey's screen test received mixed impressions from producers, it did have a considerable impact on the art department, and functioned as a stylistic guideline. In his description of the test, Ivano noted, "These trials were so successful, so beautiful from the artistic and photographic point of view, that all the directors of the studio wanted to make the film" (Taves 1987, 127). Furthermore, Florey's version of the script clearly insisted that the sets be "more impressionistic than scientific, and [were] designed to create a feeling of modern scientific 'magic' – something suggestive of the laboratory in *Metropolis*" (Riley 1989). Although the screen test did not benefit from the modern electrical devices that appear in the final result, the idea of modernity had been injected in the art directors' mind through the script's descriptions. The extent of Florey's influence on the project is questionable, but many of his ideas clearly remain in the film's final version.

In 1931, Charles Hall was the head of the Art Department at Universal Studios. According to Taves, Hall made more than fifty sketches for the sets following the director's guidelines (1987, 132). But according to Curtis, only a few of the sketches used for the film were drawn by Hall.<sup>24</sup> These sketches followed Florey's design conception, offering a décor highly influenced by German expressionism with the final scene taking place in a large leaning windmill, as suggested in his version of the screenplay. Another important art director at the studio, Hermann Rosse, was put in charge of the overall look of *Frankenstein* (Turner 1989, 89). Only a few of Rosse's thirty-two drawings are still available today.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, these drawings suggest how each of these art directors contributed to the style of the film's sets.

Like Florey, Whale was also fascinated by German horror, and further developed the sets accordingly. However, a conflict was taking place inside the studio concerning the art direction. The front office wanted the film to have a modern look and rejected Florey's idea, while Whale was more interested in something partly German expressionist and partly Gothic (Turner 1989, 89). Despite Whale's important status as a director at Universal, the studio executives wanted to maintain a prominently Gothic style in order to draw similarity with *Dracula* and the previous silent horror features. Moreover, the extravagant construction, of both the windmill and the laboratory, in which the monster is brought to life, necessitated important financial investments. Although the studio had a considerable amount of money to invest, the budget was limited and had to

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<sup>24</sup> According to my personal email correspondence with Curtis.

<sup>25</sup> These drawings can be found in Philip J. Riley's *MagicImage Filmbooks Presents Frankenstein* (1989).

respect the financial situation of the studio.<sup>26</sup> The reuse of some of the sets from earlier horror features became an important issue to take into account when discussing the film's style, the aspect that most influenced the inconsistency of the overall style.

### **The Tower Laboratory**

According to Paul Ivano, *Frankenstein*'s screen test, which consisted of a scene that takes place in the laboratory, was shot on a funnel-shaped variation of *Dracula*'s set. The original sets had been covered with drapes to make them "resemble the interior of a well, so that all of the lighting had to come from above" (Ivano's personal notes, quoted in Taves 1987, 124). The idea of a funnel-shaped design was kept in the actual film, but many other components were added to bring a different visual texture and to correspond to some of what the producers wanted.

One sketch of the laboratory drawn by Herman Rosse is available today. It supports the idea of a circular well shape, which he emphasized by adding a circular platform on an upper floor surrounding the table on which the monster lies (fig. 2.1). Rosse's laboratory presents the idea of having a level for the experiment and a second floor for the observers. What mostly characterizes his conception of the set is the smoothness of its walls, the refining of its structures and surfaces, and its use of modern equipment.

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<sup>26</sup> Despite the success of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and *Dracula*, Universal was still facing enormous financial difficulties.

The actual set is much smaller than Rosse's drawing suggested and does not have a comparably modern look. This indicates that Whale and the studio executives might have insisted on incorporating more Gothic stylistic markers. The resulting elements of modernist design are mostly found in the electrical devices. The equipment is sophisticated, yet the walls are angular and their square brick texture, reminiscent of medieval architecture, gives the illusion of an aged structure. A few scattered stones slightly emerging from the walls create raised motifs that add a disorganized texture to the room. The elevation around the table found in the sketch was reduced, replaced by small steps separating the table and the place where the observers stand, and the whole circumference of the laboratory is much more restrained, surrounded by the massive brick walls. This leaves space for more intimate interaction between the scientist and his guests despite the large dimensions of the set. The slightly elevated platform on the left part of the room leaves the operating table on an inferior level, in a way that removes it from the space where the characters interact, and which emphasizes the murky nature of the experiment.

The set's square stones and high open ceiling are oriented vertically and point toward the sky, which further evokes the Gothic tradition. Simultaneously, the oblique walls and the chiaroscuro effects reflect the German expressionist horror style. The modern aspect suggested by Rosse's sketch was maintained by the contribution of electrician Kenneth Strickfaden, who brought many stylized electrical devices and roundly shaped apparatuses to fill the space. However, the large amount of disordered



technological machineries facilitates a sense of chaos and disorganization, rather than refinement, and makes the set appear more saturated and claustrophobic.

Florey's idea of using a vertical structure forces a hierarchy in the organization of the space. The laboratory tower is erected against the thunderstorm and pierces the sky with its sharp summit. From the outside, the structure is reminiscent of Gothic iconography: its sharply pointed rooftops suggest a desire to reach heavenward and to connect with sublime forces. The laboratory provides an impression of limitlessness from the inside because of its open ceiling – the angles of the walls echo the tower's shape and its sense of boundlessness. Conversely, the shaft structure of the laboratory, with its small aperture on the top allowing the light to enter the room only from above, draws the attention to the obscurity of Dr. Frankenstein's experiment. While the exterior of the structure appears to be an erected tower, its interior is designed like a profound abyss. The hierarchy between the characters gains further significance once the other rooms located in the tower are revealed. The murderous creature is imprisoned at the lowest level, a few steps below the entrance, while the scientist maintains his superiority by his positioning located on a slightly higher floor of the laboratory.

The other section of the laboratory is the cave in which the monster is imprisoned – a dungeon made of contorted structures (fig. 2.2). The back wall is made of angles converging towards a small window located in the back of the room, cornering the creature in a dead end. Flowing through the laboratory's structure, light enters the room from above, instead of from the window. The open ceiling of the set draws the spectator's

attention to its vertical dimension. The monster continuously makes the same gesture of opening his hands towards the sky as if he is attempting to reach it. Nothing in this description suggests that the cave should appear to be an entrapping dungeon. However, the addition of a large oblique structure positioned above the head of the monster is enough to give the illusion of a closed space.<sup>27</sup> This imitation ceiling, along with the walls that converge towards the small window, support the sense of entrapment and yet leave a space for an aperture enabling the monster to mime a conversation with the light above him.<sup>28</sup> His behavior emphasizes the verticality of the tower and the connection with God, while the illusion of a slanted roof brought by the horizontal structure and the convergence of lines toward the back window breaks this linearity by referencing the angular style of German horror. The electrical devices support the modern and scientific aspects, while the structure, and the material utilized for its construction, evoke Gothicism. In the end, the laboratory is clearly a mixture of modern, scientific, Gothic and expressionist design and shows how more than one set designer has influenced the project.

### **The Mill Tower**

The final confrontation with the monster takes place in a dilapidated windmill that dominates the horizon with its elevated structure. The mill seems to share the most design similarities with the original script, in which the first room was described as “a small circular room, just large enough to accommodate the pump-shaft,” and where “everything is in a state of decay” (Riley 1989, 91). The final result in fact consists of a small room

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<sup>27</sup> A similar strategy was used in the corridor in Elizabeth’s mansion, as it will be discussed later.

<sup>28</sup> It is also interesting to note that this strategy was a good way to save on the expenses and to avoid complications that would have brought the construction of a whole ceiling.

filled with pieces of wood and columns (fig. 2.3). In spite of maintaining the expressionist angular design of the laboratory, the cluttered surroundings help to emphasize the tension and confusion of the fighting sequence. The compact organization creates a miniature maze, which has a disturbing effect on the narrative by providing a sense of unpredictable danger. This is further supported by Whale's avoidance of master shots. The interior of the mill is claustrophobic, which emphasizes the sense of imprisonment and the conflicted mental state of the monster. Unlike what the imposing exterior of the structure suggests, the spaciousness, the large mechanisms, and the unusual angles were left aside for this the design of this interior set.

According to the script's description, the windmill was also supposed to contain apertures offering the possibility to create chiaroscuro effects with the lighting.<sup>29</sup> In his drawing of the first sketches, Charles Hall discarded this idea and decided to make the mill more obscure (fig. 2.4) and more complex and labyrinthine, in a way that would force more diverse camera positions in order to present the action.<sup>30</sup> While he was imagining something more spacious, with voluminous gears, the scriptwriters and filmmakers saw the opportunity to create a suffocating space. The exterior of the mill, with its conic vertical structure quite similar to that of the laboratory, is the only over-proportioned part of the set, a characteristic that follows both Florey and Hall's ideas.

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<sup>29</sup> The actual description from the screenplay on which Florey had been working mentions the presence of "oblique shafts of light which enter through holes in the roof" (Riley 1989, 93).

<sup>30</sup> The condensing of the mill's interior space complicates the making of an ensemble shot.

## Typical Studio Interiors

Most of the scenes take place in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, yet there are a few scenes shot inside Elizabeth's mansion. The style of these sets offers a contrast with the grandiose, angular laboratory and the imprisoning windmill. Its heavily ornamented walls and its flower motif décor appear to be emerging from Gothic influences. The living room is more typical of the studio's usual set designs, which feature a square organization set within three walls. This type of construction facilitates a straightforward comprehension of geographical space. The screenplay offers very little description of this room, which suggests that it was not one of the major preoccupations for the filmmakers. The square textures on the walls and doors (fig. 2.5) are characteristic of Universal set design (especially in their horror films),<sup>31</sup> which was not seen often in the other studios. These sets are quite mundane, except for the excessive use of flower motifs and bouquets – an aspect that suggests Whale's contribution: Curtis notes, Whale had an obsession with flowers (Curtis, 125). However, some parts of the mansion were designed to incorporate subtle elements that would serve to recall the angular style of the laboratory.

The structure of Elizabeth's living room heavily contrasts with the open-ceiling and more spacious laboratory tower. Yet the corridor adjacent to that room was constructed with two oblique beams, which recall the disruptive feeling of chaos by disturbing the equilibrium of the set (fig. 2.6). This type of disruptive chaos is also seen in the monster's dungeon. The addition of that spacious corridor is enough to reference

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<sup>31</sup> Universal's film sets were often small and had a very simple spatial organization. For instance a film like *Counsellor at Law* (1933), which was taking place in an office building, relied exclusively on the three-wall theatrical structure. Moldings on the walls were often added to texture to sets – bookshelves and portraits were very often seen in Hollywood, but these types of square moldings were characteristic of Universal Studios.

the sense of verticality found in the other sets, something that is lost in the other rooms of the mansion. In this way, although the sets do not seem to have any stylized specificities of their own to support the disturbance of *Frankenstein's* universe, they do contain some recurrent elements that allow the film to develop a unique style.

This is also true of the persistence of some specific props and elements of the background, which enable the film to develop its own consistent universe. For instance, the appearance of various types of skeletal figures reoccur throughout the film, specifically in the backgrounds of places in which life, death, sanity and science are questioned or discussed. These spaces are introduced gradually, from the cemetery to the school of medicine and Waldman's office. In all of the places where the characters experiment with or discuss mortality, those props become intrinsic components of the decor and provide a sense of morbidity. Skulls and skeletons are found in every scientific place, as if science reflects death. Although science is partly associated with modernity, a morbid connotation is clearly given to it with the use of these dead figures.

### **Reused Exteriors**

The first scene of the film takes place outside, in a cemetery filled with slanted crosses and painted clouds. This cemetery, which was clearly built inside the studio, introduces an artificial studio-bound aesthetic that corresponds to the rest of the film's sets. Similar to the cemetery are the mill's surroundings, which consist of similar artificial hills extended under a menacing sky charged with painted clouds.

There are only a few scenes offering a break from these studio-bound sets by introducing a more natural environment. The first exterior scene is the scene of a little girl's murder, which was shot on Malibou Lake in the Santa Monica Mountains (Mank 2009, 9). The only other exterior scene, the one in which the angry villagers bring back the little girl's body, was actually a case of set reuse, shot on the European village built for *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Those two exterior locations offer a break with the other studio-bound sets and create a rupture with the artificial expressionist and Gothic style of the film. The imprisoning and claustrophobic sets are briefly replaced with luminous, natural exteriors, which contrast with the massive, imprisoning brick walls and funnel-shaped interiors. No stylistic modifications of the sets were made to establish consistency between the entirety of the film: angled motifs and expressionistic designs are not present in these sequences. As a result, they both create an obvious disjunction with the rest of the film, and, in the end, it seems as if the only scenes in which the film loses the consistency of its style are these, where the producers' strategy to save money is clearly exposed.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the considerable budget accorded to the production of *Frankenstein*, the set designers did not have *carte blanche* to create an entirely new collection of sets. While the art directors had ideas for grandiose dimensions, some limitations had to be imposed because of the diverging opinions among the set designers, and also because of financial constraints.

Unlike *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* appears to have more of a definite world of its own, which is mostly associated with expressionism, despite its Gothic influence. While the preceding film had more of a clear opposition between the normal world and the world of evil, in this film, there is no opposition between daily life and the world of the creatures of the night. The difference in the style of the sets simply varies from the obscure laboratory to Elizabeth's mansion in order to support the imbalance between the dark scientific world and the everyday life, without establishing a definitive opposition between them because they are united by carefully placed recurrent motifs.

With the large number of professionals who worked on *Frankenstein*, the project was pulled in many directions. Hall's designs are more expressionist and show an awareness of the use of the lighting while Rosse's sketches are more grandiose and tend toward a contemporary modern look. The final result inevitably shows a few disjunctions between the various styles that each of these individuals wanted, yet the addition of specific recurrences suggests the concerns of employees working as a team. The script developed by Florey and Fort shows that their participation in the project was driven by a desire to develop a precise atmosphere that would affect the viewers. The immense proportions and labyrinthine organization of the space were some of the main stylistic markers desired for the creation of *Frankenstein*. The set designers were able to create something visually stylized despite the divergent opinions. Only the exterior scenes seem to radically break the continuity uniting the interior sets. These scenes are those in which the film briefly loses its thematic poignancy. Ultimately, however, the apparent stylistic

disjunctions throughout the rest of the film actually result in a coherent aesthetic signature that emphasizes the uncanny world of *Frankenstein*.



### Chapter 3

#### The Black Cat – The Universalized Bauhaus

By the year 1934, Universal had gained much recognition for its production of horror films. *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* were some of the studio's biggest moneymakers in 1931, and adapting well-known European horror novels proved a successful production strategy in terms of monetary return. Next to Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe was one of the important names that studio executives were eager to utilize for cinematic adaptations. However, the poor critical and box office results of the 1932 adaptation of *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, directed by Robert Florey, made executives hesitant to make a cinematic version of a Poe story. Most of the sets used for the film were designed in collaboration between Robert Florey and Charles Hall. Like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, the exterior streets were filled with an opaque mist and high-contrast lighting that emphasizes the shadows of the constructions. Most of the scenes were shot in small studio rooms comparable in size to the contemporary bedrooms found in *Dracula*. The set designs of *Rue Morgue*, along with Karl Freund's cinematography, are some of the main elements that made the film one of the most aesthetically resonant films of the horror cycle.

After *Rue Morgue*'s release in December 1932, scriptwriters Stanley Bergman and Jack Cunningham decided to provide a treatment for a story that combined elements from Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Black Cat*,<sup>32</sup> but after seeing the poor reception of *Rue Morgue*, the producers refused to invest in further developments for the

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<sup>32</sup> This adaptation was entitled *The Brain Never Dies*.

film. Meanwhile also at Universal, James Whale was in the process of becoming a star director of the horror cycle, and developed amalgamations of the horror and comedy genres. The successes of *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *The Invisible Man* (1933) concretized the potential of the horror genre. The project of adapting an Edgar Allan Poe story was reconsidered in January 1933, when scriptwriters Tom Kilpatrick and Dale Van Every began working on a treatment for an adaptation that would combine elements from *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Black Cat*. The treatment was re-worked in February 1933 but was never scripted. It specified that the sets would be familiar to what the Universal Horror fans were used to seeing: “a decadent, cat-strewn castle” located in the Carpathian Mountains (Mendell, 182).

At this stage in the pre-production, the producers were still very hesitant about the project. The project began to take shape only when director Edgar G. Ulmer came into the picture. Laemmle Jr. guaranteed Ulmer that he would be given the chance to direct the project if he could produce a good script out of Van Every and Kilpatrick’s ideas (Lennig, 196). Ulmer accepted, but he was in fact determined to follow his own plan. He decided to incorporate his fascination for Aleister Crowley’s occultist practices and added a strange story between two deranged men and a couple imprisoned in an isolated mansion. The Poe story was transformed into something truly different. The project, submitted on February 17, 1934, was approved despite these obscure changes. It was approved for two specific reasons: two days before the script was submitted, on February 15, Carl Laemmle Jr. was called to court in New York City and had to leave the studio (Mandell, 185). E. M. Asher, an important producer strongly attached to the horror genre,

approved the script in Laemmle's absence. Moreover, Ulmer had already guaranteed that he would be able to make the film with a B-feature budget; more precisely for \$90,000. The script was approved without a final examination. The film would star two of the studios' most famous actors: Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. Laemmle's absence and his blind trust in Ulmer were of great help to the project. As Ulmer recalled in an interview with Peter Bodganovich, "When I came to him [Laemmle Jr.] with the idea of *The Black Cat*, which would employ Lugosi and Karloff at the same time in the same picture, because each one had been successful, Junior gave me free rein to write a horror picture of the style we had started in Europe with *Caligari*" (Bodganovich, 204).<sup>33</sup> Later in the same interview, he mentions: "Junior let me do the sets and everything at the same time" (205). Through this statement, Ulmer suggests that he was in full charge of the direction of the film and its set design. Unfortunately, there is very little information available regarding the production, and there is nothing to contradict this idea: only a few budget sheets remain, and there are no sketches or notes about the construction of the sets. Although Charles Hall was once again credited for art direction, there is a clear consensus among film scholars and historians that Ulmer designed the unusual mansion in which the story takes place. However, this can clearly be questioned when one examines the film closely.

According to Bodganovich, the film was issued from Ulmer's "Bauhaus period" (204). Counter to what Laemmle had planned, the film ended up being very different from *Caligari*. The set design is certainly what distinguishes *The Black Cat* from the

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<sup>33</sup> The reason why Junior asked for this is that Ulmer had in fact been working on the design of the sets for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and many other German Expressionist films like *The Golem* and *Metropolis*.

other films of the studio's horror cycle since it was the first and only film with a predominantly Bauhaus style. Although the style appears to be unusual for a horror film – the literature from which it was taking its inspiration was mostly Gothic and cinematic horror had been primarily depicted in Gothic and Expressionist aesthetics – the choice of this architectural style can be explained in a variety of ways. As Lucy Fischer argues in *Designing Woman*, modernist styles had for a long time already been associated with evil in films, especially since *Metropolis* (1927). In *The Black Cat*, the main and second floors of the house were designed as a modern prison. What seems to have been unnoticed by the scholars and critics is that the slick and innovative appearance of the mansion's architecture reveals the typical motifs of Universal's most famous ghoulish undergrounds. The recurrence of a few elements, characteristic of the previous horror films, ends up deflating some of this uniqueness associated with the film.

### **Bauhaus Horror**

Ulmer had been introduced to Bauhaus architecture years before the production of *The Black Cat* began as he had spent most of his life in Germany. The architects of the Bauhaus school were more than a group of artists sharing similar approaches to their work.<sup>34</sup> According to Tom Wolfe, “it was more than a school; it was a commune, a spiritual movement, a radical approach to art in all its forms, a philosophical center comparable to the Garden of Epicurus” (Wolfe 10). The philosophy of the Bauhaus architects was in fact a rigorous doctrine that distinguished itself from bourgeois ideologies and tastes. One of the ways of rejecting these ideologies was the design of flat

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<sup>34</sup> The Bauhaus School had been opened by Walter Gropius in Weimar in 1919 and was in force until 1933, when the Nazis decided to shut it down.

roofs, since “pitched roofs and cornices represented the ‘crowns’ of the old nobility” (Wolfe 23). Moreover, there was a rejection of everything that looked luxurious, such as granite, marble, limestone, and red brick, as well as an avoidance of ornamentations like crown moldings, pilasters, drapes or wallpaper (Wolfe 32). Thinner material like stucco or glass was used for the interior walls.

Bauhaus ideologies were opposed to everything that was associated with the high ceilings, elevated towers and curved arches associated with Gothicism and Expressionism – the styles that characterized Universal Studios’ horror films. Ulmer's idea was to avoid using high ceilings and vertical structures like those seen in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, and to instead have a refined space freed from any ornamentation other than lines and geometrical forms, a mansion that would reflect the rigor of the Bauhaus architects and their rigorous ideologies. It must also be noted that the main character, Hjamar Poelzig, is said to be responsible for the design of his own house.<sup>35</sup> The geometry and the absence of adornments clearly reflect a sense of seriousness and a certain rigor. Following the Bauhaus ideologies, there are no superfluous elements in Poelzig’s mansion, and everything has an architectural purpose. Interestingly, Ulmer uses this architecture to portray a story where nothing is as it seems, and in which the truth about the purpose of the house is hidden in its basement.

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<sup>35</sup> Poelzig, played by Boris Karloff, was in fact named in honor of Hans Poelzig; the German set designer who worked on *The Golem* (1920), the German Expressionist horror film that had a strong influence on *Frankenstein*.

### **A Prison Governed by Illusion**

Like *Dracula*, *The Black Cat* begins with the main characters' journey to the Carpathian Mountains. Although the rickety stagecoach has been replaced with a more modern form of transportation – the train – the backdrop is highly similar to what is seen in *Dracula* (compare fig. 3.1 and 3.2). The intrusion of Modernity is confirmed when Dr. Vitrius Werdegas and newlyweds Peter and Joan Allison arrive at the Austrian architect's mansion. The most remarkable element of Poelzig's house is certainly its luminous wall made of square glass blocks located behind the curved staircase facing the entrance door (fig. 3.3). While the prison-like design of the wall suggests Poelzig's sense of order and discipline, its obstructed transparency indicates the presence of something hidden underneath the surface.

The square motifs on the wall are just some of the innumerable geometrical figures that fill the entire house. The curtains, bedheads, lamps and banisters all reinforce the idea of order associated with the Bauhaus style. The reappearance of these motifs and of the same horizontally striped lamps in every room illustrates Poelzig's control over this environment. Moreover, the four bedrooms are analogically designed: the beds lay on the right side of the rooms and are accompanied by adjacent, small angular walls, and a door stands in the middle of the wall facing the camera. Only Poelzig's room slightly differs with its canopied four-poster bed on which lies his beloved – the only bourgeois piece of furniture conflicting with the dominant Bauhaus style.

The suggestion that something is hidden underneath the foundations of the house is introduced early in the film when it is mentioned that Poelzig's mansion was built on an ancient prison camp in which thousands of men were murdered. As narrative events progress, more secrets are revealed from underneath the house's surfaces. The more that is learnt about the house, the more the viewer is led to discover that the refined Bauhaus style is only a façade that masks a secret basement. Once the presence of this basement is revealed, the manifestations of a different architectural style begin to appear.

### **The Underground Repercussions**

The core of Poelzig's mansion is not found in the room with the luminous tiled wall on the main floor, but rather within its abysmal basement. The first time Poelzig and Werdegas visit the underground laboratory, the setting appears to be constructed with the same modern style that is found in the two main floors of the house. The white walls are made out of large rectangular stones, horizontally superposed in a similar way to those horizontal motifs found on the upper floors' mural surfaces (fig. 3.4). In this scene where the house's secrets are slowly revealed, Werdegas discovers his wife's dead body positioned next to a wall covered with square measures (fig. 3.5). The geometrical motifs clearly recall the patterns found on the wall facing the main entrance of the house. At the end of this first scene in the basement, Werdegas impulsively steps back when he sees Poelzig's black cat, which causes the wall behind him to fall to pieces. The apparent modern scientific tool reveals to be a fragile superfluous design. However, this wall is the only element that clearly recalls the Bauhaus design seen upstairs.

For most of this scene the visual elements bring reminiscences of the sets from previous Universal Horror films. The stones utilized for the construction of the wall are shaped in a similar way to those found on the walls of Dracula's catacombs and of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, although their shape is here clearly designed more geometrically, which corresponds to the sense of order associated with Poelzig. The long spiral staircase that leads to the cave also suggests an abyssal construction, which is again reminiscent of Dr. Frankenstein's deep laboratory. Some of the characteristics of Universal's horror set design slowly become apparent although they remain very subtle in this first scene set in the basement. At this early stage in the film, the overall appearance of the unadorned and geometrical cave generally appears to be complimentary of the prominent modern style. While the characters progressively venture into this obscure environment, the horror style begins to surface, at the same pace in which Poelzig's secret activities are revealed.

### **The Universal Modern Look**

The secret path that leads to the secret room consists of a labyrinth of angular walls ending with massive dungeon-like doors (fig. 3.6 and 3.7). The room in which the Black Mass is performed is gradually introduced as the characters progress through the corridor to reach the core of the mansion. The room is revealed to be of circular shape, with angular columns around its center (fig. 8). The geometrical shape of the columns and the unadorned walls recall the idea of the Bauhaus and the organization of the first and second floors of the mansion. According to Lucy Fischer, this room is clearly the place where the modernist style and evil collide:



[T]he clearest link in the film between the Style Moderne and evil is the Satanic Mass at which Poelzig officiates. In his cellar 'chapel,' he is surrounded by angular, canted, Constructivist crosses reminiscent of the framing the two Marias in the catacombs of *Metropolis*. [...] Here again, in the lower depths of an avant-garde edifice [...], the distressing moral valence of modernism is disclosed (Fischer 228).

The overall design of the room is clearly constructed from modernist influences but the center stage mimics a design similar to the other Universal horror films. The stage where the ritual takes place is slightly elevated above the ground and contains a leaning cross in its center, which is positioned in a way that makes it appear almost as a replica of Dr. Mirakle's laboratory in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (compare fig. 9, 10). The actions of the characters also evoke some similarities between both films as a comparable scene is performed: the victim, an innocent young girl, is attached to the cross in the center of the stage for an experiment (which here takes the form of a Black Mass ceremony).<sup>36</sup>

After the interruption of the Black Mass, Werdegas finally discovers a secret room in Poelzig's laboratory. The table of experiments and the table where Werdegas' daughter lies clearly appear to be the same in both films (compare fig. 12 and 13). This place thus appears to be a mixture of the laboratories of Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Mirakle, despite the influence of modernist design that distinguishes this place from the other Universal mad scientists' workshops. Additionally, in the final torture scene, Poelzig's shadow is projected on the wall behind him in a way that strongly recalls the shadow of the Dr. Mirakle's first victim (compare fig. 14 and 15).

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<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Mirakle was performing experiments on the body of a young virgin in *Rue Morgue*.

## Conclusion

If Ulmer, who was going through his Bauhaus period, really was "allowed to do the sets and everything," as he mentioned in his interview with Bodganovich, then why would he choose to reuse similar expressionist motifs that were used in the previous horror films of the studio? The film begins by establishing the location – the Carpathian Mountains – as the treatment of February 1933 suggests. In this sense, Ulmer did in fact positively respond to Laemmle's demand for the mountainous location. The house's horizontal structure contrasts with the verticality of the mountain, and appears to suggest Ulmer's desire to transform the style that was associated with Universal's horror features, or, at least suggests an overt manifestation of his desire to move away from it. During the first scenes of the film, this idea is confirmed by the Bauhaus design. Ulmer did take liberties designing the sets. As Paul Mandell describes in his analysis of the film,

This [design] seems strange from a director who claimed so much allegiance to Caligarism, for these sets are the very antithesis of *Caligari*. Bright, geometric and clean, the set is surprisingly simple – a backlit cyclorama, a large framework of Bauhaus squares, and a curved staircase (Mandell 186).

The final result is very different from what Laemmle Jr. had suggested. As the story progresses, it becomes more and more obvious that the sets are in fact very similar to other horror features produced by the studio. The mix between the different styles, as in *Dracula*, only reinforces the idea of a cohabitation of two worlds – the innocent normality and the sadistic satanic rituals. Despite Ulmer's intention to make something that would be more of an auteur film, *The Black Cat* very much so remained a Universal product.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

The set design of Universal studio's first sound horror cycle certainly contains characteristics that were stylistically distinguishable from horror films produced by other Hollywood studios during the Golden Era. That peculiar style was mostly influenced by European filmmaking, but there was also a clear sense of continuity with Universal's silent horror films. *Dracula*, like *The Phantom of the Opera*, takes place in dusty ruins and dark undergrounds with small staircases and dark hallways. The vast entrance of Dracula's castle also shares a lot with the Gothic cathedral of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with its high ceilings and long vertical windows. All of these films, particularly those in which Charles Hall participated, are united by numerous similarities. The patterns on the curtains in Dracula's living room are heavily reminiscent of the curtains in *The Man Who Laughs* (compare fig. 1 and 2), and the cemetery in *Frankenstein* (compare fig. 3 and 4) is quite similar to the plain on which hanged men float, also in *The Man Who Laughs*. The links drawn between the silent horror films and the films of the first sound horror cycle are innumerable. Why, then, is *Dracula* considered to be the starting point of a new style of horror?

Universal's *Dracula* evolved in a ghoulish, Gothic construction carefully designed with special effects that made it look extremely dusty and proportionally immense. The film oscillated between these immense dark interior spaces and small present-day apartments, such as the comparison of the Transylvanian ruins to the Abbey. The set design of *Dracula* became a model that was imitated in many ways by the studio's

subsequent horror films. The film became a guideline on which the genre formula was based. Weaver and Brunas note:

It's [*Dracula's*] importance in film history and its influence on later films is tremendous. It set forth all the conventions of the archetypal vampire film, laying groundwork that would be capitalized upon in scores of latter-day follow-ups. It [...] spawned the classic Universal horror series of the early '30s. Its status as a movie milestone is untarnished (32-33).

What made *Dracula* a "movie milestone" can be explained through the analysis of its set design. What mostly stand out in *Dracula* are the Gothic elements. These elements remain present in the subsequent films of the cycle, but not as predominantly. The primary similarities between this film and its successors are a result of three considerations: the way in which the sets balance various styles in a cohesive combination of elements that provide an overall consistency; the way the positioning of the characters is signified through the use of doors and staircases; and the way in which the rooms feature characteristics associated with their inhabitants.

Slightly moving away from the Gothic, *Frankenstein* was primarily rooted in the German expressionist tradition, and also incorporated elements of the Gothic and modern scientific equipment. With the changes of scriptwriters and directors, and with numerous set designers having drawn sketches for the film, the sets ended up oscillating between a variety of styles. However, like in *Dracula*, the addition of subtle elements to create a unity in the overall style of the film establishes a similar sense of cohesion. Although the sets have no arches and narrow glass windows, the verticality of the space clearly recalls characteristics reminiscent of *Dracula*. The detailed ornamentations in Elizabeth's mansion also recall elements of the Gothic. The material used for the set design – the

imitation of square stone walls, the painted mattes, and the wire-netted windows – also provide the films with a comparable visual texture that became typical of Universal studios.

For *The Black Cat*, Universal's executives shared the desire to attempt something more modern. However, only a part of the sets ended up having a clearly unique style. A major portion of the sets contains the same elements found in the other films (square stones, moldings integrated in the walls, heavy dungeon doors, crosses, stages, places of cult happenings). Like the previous features, it was conceptualized by a European director who wanted to make it look European, but in the end, it remained a studio film. Despite their exotic characteristics, the films of the cycle do not veil their studio origins.

The three films analyzed here all have a style of set design that brought something unique to the cycle. A number of horror features were made between *Frankenstein* and *The Black Cat*, and each one of them offered an opportunity to explore a different style: *The Mummy* (1932) introduced Art Deco and Egyptian motifs, while James Whale's comedy horrors revealed an old, highly atmospheric haunted manor (*The Old Dark House* (1934)) and a small imprisoning two-floor hotel isolated in a desert of snow (*The Invisible Man* (1933)). Each A-feature of the cycle proffers its own unique style, but also ends up revealing some of the same characteristics found in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. The fact that the same team of artists worked on each of these films might be the answer to this recurrence. But who exactly deserves to be credited for the style of the sets of Universal's horror features?

## Charles Hall, The Gothic & The Factory Work

Robert Florey was greatly influential on the set design of two early films of the horror cycle. Brian Taves has credited Florey for providing the European feel of the cycle.<sup>37</sup> According to Taves, "the cycle [of horror] was not fully launched until *Frankenstein* and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which between them created the motifs and conventions that would define the genre's future parameters" (1987, 37). As the production documents analyzed here have shown, Florey's contribution is quite considerable, and there are evident similarities between these two features and the subsequent films of the cycle. *The Black Cat* contains many scenes highly reminiscent of *Rue Morgue*, and the same similarities can be observed within the other monster features produced by the studio. But the stylistic parameters instituted by the director of *Rue Morgue* are not as considerable as Taves suggests. Charles Hall is also responsible for most of the recurrent elements that reappear in all the films of the cycle.

What mostly stands out in Hall's design is the use of stairs and platforms, which continually allow the evil or monstrous creatures to be placed in a symbolic position of power. Like *Dracula*, Dr. Frankenstein's monster makes its first appearance at the top of a staircase and is later imprisoned in a basement. When the monster escapes at the end of the film, Dr. Frankenstein automatically goes to look for him upstairs, reminding the viewer of the monster's desire to connect with the forces above. The monster continually attempts to reach the highest level of the tower-shaped sets. In the finale, the creature is seen floating above the villagers, hanging by the blades of the windmill. This desire to

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<sup>37</sup> Taves also gives credits to cinematographer and director Karl Freund. Freund's contribution will not be discussed here since it mostly relates to the use of lighting and camera angles, and not specifically to set design.

ascend is certainly not an invention of Hall, but finds its origins in the Gothic association of spatial superiority as a form of power, which is also part of Shelley's novel. As David Huckvale notes in his study of Gothic motifs in horror cinema: "the castle and its towers, as well as its staircases, eventually became psychological symbols of authority and power in [Gothic] fiction and film" (13).<sup>38</sup> This is confirmed by an examination of the sets of the other films of the cycle simply by looking at their overall architectural design. In *The Invisible Man*, the mad scientist remains cloistered in his room on the second floor of the two-floor hotel for the majority of the film, which allows him to remain above the owners of the property and the guests. Contrarily, in *The Old Dark House*, the guests spend most of their time on the main floor – the most inferior level – while being terrorized by the evil spirits that appear to be surrounding them. Like Count Dracula, the owners of the house welcome the visitor by going down the stairs. Only *The Mummy* escapes this characteristic of hierarchies in space, and interestingly, it is the only film of the cycle for which Hall is not credited.<sup>39</sup>

Michael L. Stephens gives credit to Charles Hall for creating a studio-bound style. He notes: "With smaller resources than available at other studios, Hall became a master of minimalism and, rather audaciously, never tried to hide the studio origins of the films' settings: the cemeteries, mountain roads and giant castle were all obviously created in the studio" (150). The shadows and painted mattes used to create atmosphere do in fact clearly reflect the studio origins of the films. The vast majority of the films Hall has

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<sup>38</sup> Huckvale also gives credits to Universal Studio's horror films' use of staircase for having a major influence on the horror films produced by the Hammer Studio in Britain.

<sup>39</sup> The art director for this film was Willy Pogany. *The Mummy* is the only horror film he designed at Universal.

worked on, including the silent horror films, did not attempt to hide the fact that they were designed inside the studio. They were built in segments and featured fragmented staircases that clearly lead nowhere. This did not make the sets less effective, but instead became a characteristic of the studio's style. Despite the credit that Hall deserves, he was not the only person responsible for the set design of the films. The fact that the films were made as factory products, and that they reused the same items consistently throughout, results in a consistent mixture of styles.

### **The Impact of Budget Constraints**

The alternative strategies sought in order to respect budgetary constraints often resulted in interesting visual elements, like the painted clouds that provided an impressionist feel to the studio exterior scenes, which, in turn, are certainly responsible for the studio-bound look. Interestingly, the budget constraints support the feeling of continuity found between each of the films, but also results in a feeling of redundancy when reused extensively. At the beginning of the cycle, more specifically in *Dracula*, this reuse created an interesting, uncanny effect. For the viewers familiar with Universal's previous monster features, it created a disturbing impression of seeing a familiar location transformed into something different. The sets were shot under different angles and lighting, in a way that made them only barely recognizable. Already in *Frankenstein*, the reuse had become obvious; there was no attempt to try to cover the sets to make them look different. The sets taken from previous features were recognizable, and some of the scenes became quasi-replications of what had been seen in the studio's previous films. Most of the B-features and series made at the studio suffered from similar reuses. The sequels to *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The*



*Mummy* and *The Invisible Man* offered more opportunities of reuse. If Dr. Frankenstein's spiral staircase first appeared strange and original, by the end of the cycle it had become something very familiar. The sets were not disturbing spaces of horror anymore, but homely and recognizable shelters for the monsters. This film cycle became iconic because its approach became familiar to its audience.

### **A Studio Evolution**

Throughout the cycle, the association between the Gothic and evil was progressively overtaken by the association between modernity and evil. As explained in the general introduction of this thesis, the Art Deco style was very popular during the Golden Era. Although Universal did not invest in luxurious and glamorous design, many of the studio's later horror films featured a greater interest in modern design. The first sequel to *Dracula*, *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), took place exclusively in contemporary apartments. Only the final chase, which took place in the same underground as the preceding film, was reminiscent of Dracula's castle. In this sequel, the cobwebs, rats and dust were removed to make the set look as though it belonged in the contemporary world.

The departure of Carl Laemmle Jr. in 1936, the birth of the "New Universal," and the arrival of Albert D. D'Agostino at the head of the studio's art department are certainly related to this change, but one would need to closely study the studio's subsequent films to determine the ways in which these changes affected production. Despite a few changes in set design methodology, the films maintained similar aesthetic characteristics – the secret passages, the religious symbolism, the places of cult practices leaving space for a

horrific spectacle, – which differed from the horror films of the other studios and remained specific to Universal. Charles Hall certainly deserves some of the credit for the elaboration of these elements, but since the style of Universal's horror films depends on the mixture of different influences, it is clear that Hall was not solely responsible for the variety of styles. Despite the fact that his was often the only name that figured in the credits of these films, Hall obviously was not the only person who worked on set design. The elements that created the Universal horror style do not only result from the artistic vision of the filmmakers and set designers, but also from imposed studio constraints. The style emerged from the factory-like division of work and the desire to create a unity between diverging influences. It is the entire studio that deserves credit for the style of its films, and not a unique producer or art director.

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## Appendices

PRESS BOOK ... "DRACULA"

Box 13 / Folder 3274

32

Some of the most picturesque settings in the history of the screen are included in "Dracula", Universal's weird mystery drama which comes to the \_\_\_\_\_ Theatre on \_\_\_\_\_.

Many of the earlier scenes are laid in and about the crumbling stone castle of Count Dracula, an ancient ruin which has been ~~unoccupied~~ ~~occupied~~ for 500 years ---- except by Dracula and other "undead" vampires who return nightly from the grave, and make of the castle a veritable house of horrors. Some of the most massive sets in the history of Hollywood were constructed for this picture, showing various chambers in an advanced state of disorder, with stone balustrades and pillars fallen into disordered ruins, and the entire interior festooned with cobwebs.

There are hair-raising scenes in a graveyard, with a female vampire, risen from her grave, wandering disconsolately among the tombstones. Opening sequences depict a picturesque inn in the mountains of Transylvania, and a rocky mountain pass on a foggy night, with wolves howling in the darkness.

After the story is transferred to England, involving a terrible storm at sea, many scenes are laid in an ancient Abbey leased by Dracula ---- a location which in its ruined construction is greatly reminiscent of the castle in Transylvania.

Amid these picturesque settings is enacted what is said to be the screen's strangest story, with the famous Bela Lugosi in the title role of Count Dracula, and a cast which also includes David Manners, Helen Chandler, Edward Van Sloan, Dwight Frye, Frances Dade and Herbert Bunston.

-- 7m --

(MH)



1.2 The giant cobweb in the hall of Dracula's castle



1.3 The trees coming out of the windows in Dracula's castle



Fig. 1.4 Dracula's dining room



Fig. 1.5 The couch in Mina's living room



Fig. 1.6 The staircase in the Carfax Abbey



Fig. 1.7 The Lamp in Mina's bedroom



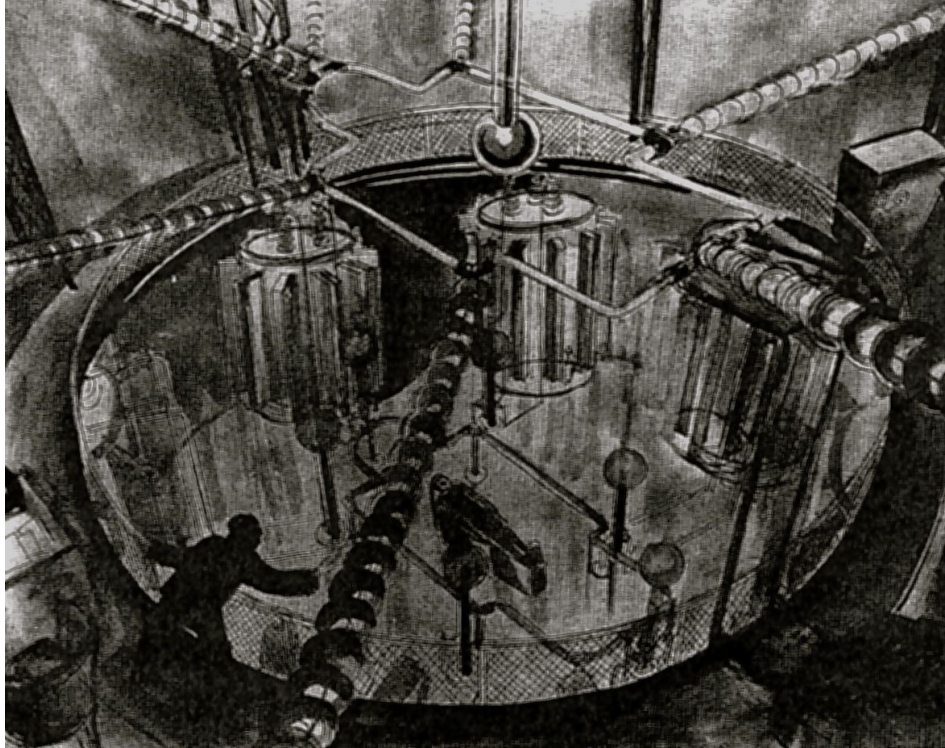


Fig. 2.1 Herman Rosse's sketch for the laboratory



Fig. 2.2 The monster's dungeon



Fig. 2.3 The mill's interior



Fig. 2.4 Charles Hall's sketch for the mill



Fig. 2.5 The doors in Elizabeth's mansion



Fig. 2.6 The corridor in Elizabeth's mansion



Fig. 3.1 Exterior of Dracula's castle



Fig. 3.2 The exterior of Hajmar Poelzig's mansion





Fig. 3.3 The entrance of Poelzig's mansion



Fig. 3.4 The horizontal lines in the underground corridor



Fig. 3.5 The measuring wall in the basement

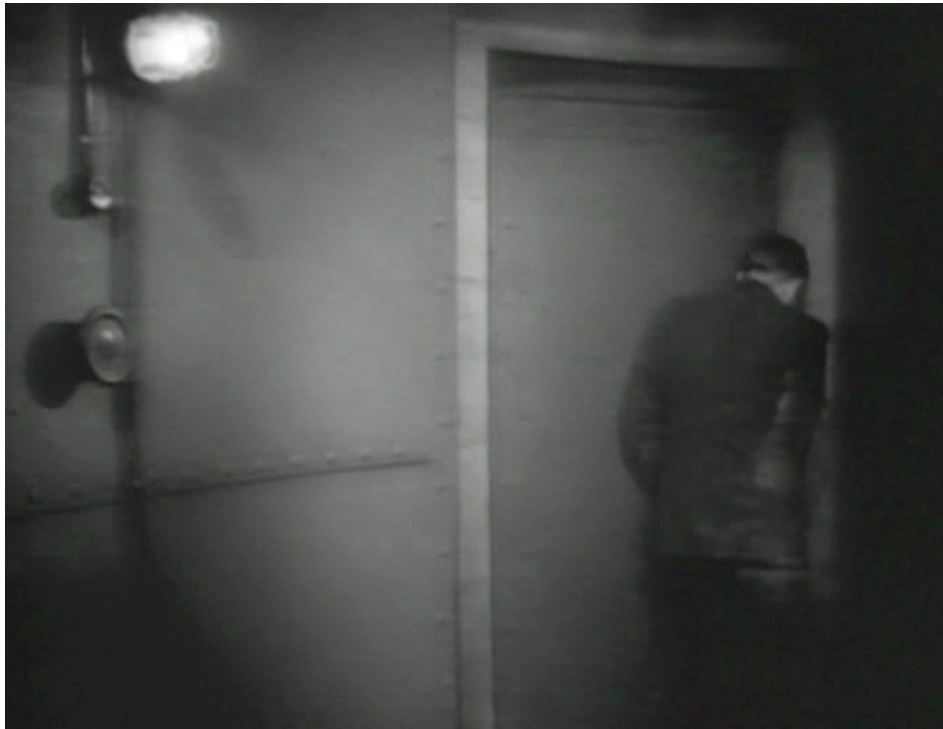


Fig. 3.6 Like the dungeon in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, the secret passage's door is very (we can see three superposed layers) thick and has some large screws coming out of it.



Fig. 3.7

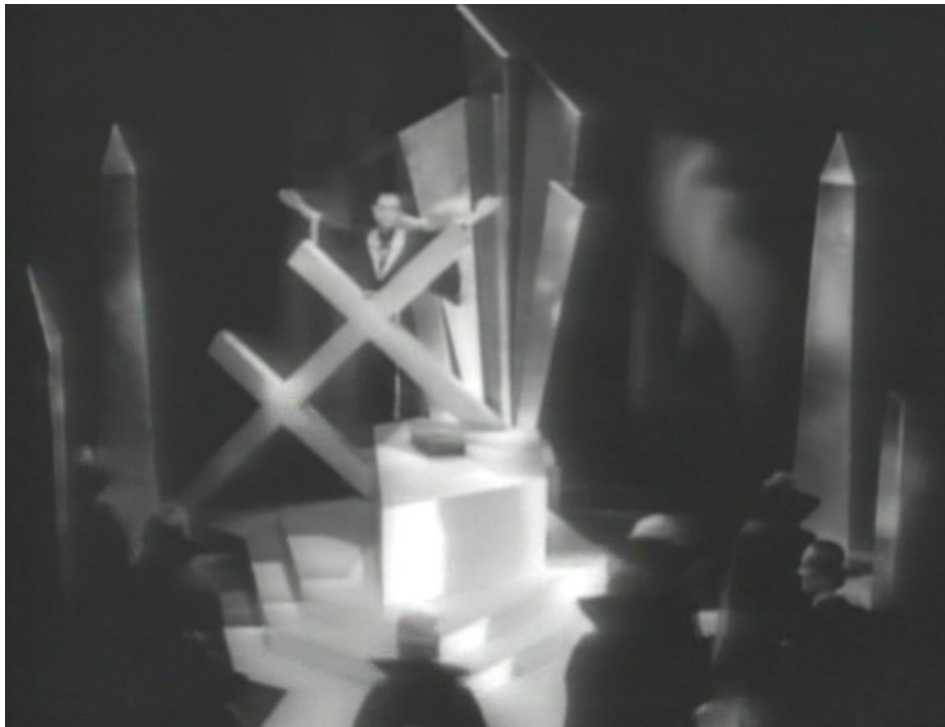


Fig. 3.8 The room for the Black Mass



Fig. 3.9 Mirakle's laboratory in *Murders in the Rue Morgue*



Fig. 3.10 The cross in the center of the Black Mass



Fig. 3.11 The table where lies Werdegas' daughter

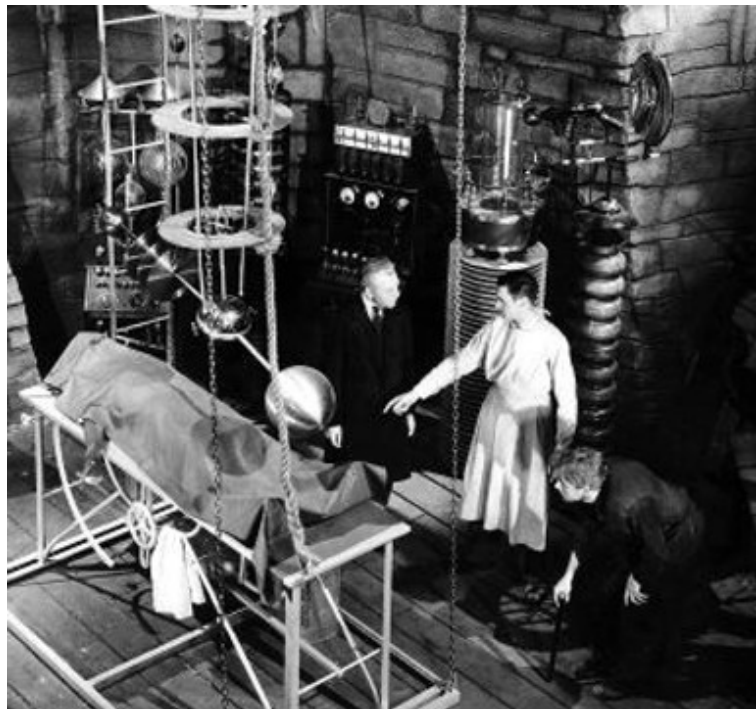


Fig. 3.12 The table of Dr. Frankenstein





Fig. 3.13 Torture scene in *Murders in the Rue Morgue*



Fig. 3.14 Torture scene in *The Black Cat*: Here, it is interesting to see how the horizontal lines between the stones that used to create a sense of geometry have been blurred, which makes the shadow more apparent. Although the cross has been replaced by a trapezoidal structure, there is a similar way of using the shadow and the space.