

## Jancovich for HOST 6.2

## 'The Theme of Psychological Destruction': Horror Stars, the Crisis of Identity and 1940s Horror

### **Introduction**

As has been demonstrated elsewhere, the horror film and the thriller were not only closely linked during the 1940s but almost synonymous terms (Jancovich 2009).

Stars' images of the period further demonstrate this association but they also illustrate the similarities between the figure of the horror villain, the gangster and the spy, particularly the Nazi spy. These figures were not only claimed to evoke fear and terror, but to do so due to the shared characteristics of these figures. Rather than simply threatening violence, these figures shared an association with psychological disturbance, by which they were not only motivated but which they also induced in their victims. Consequently, in an article published at the time, Kracauer did not distinguish between the horror film, the gangster film or the thriller but collectively referred to them as the "terror films" or "horror-thrillers", and claimed that they featured "the theme of psychological destruction" so that their villains "no longer shoot, strangle or poison the females that they want to do away with, but systematically try to drive them insane" (Kracauer 1946, 133).

In other words, while many horror villains, gangsters and spies were driven by a desire to dominate the world, their drives were often presented as psychological forces that tragically dominated them. Their desire to dominate the world was a psychological compulsion over which they had no control. Conversely, their domination of others often drove their victims into madness, or into

questioning their own sanity. In many films, victims found themselves paralyzed by an inability to trust their own perceptions of the world: unable to trust their interpretations of the world, they lacked confidence in their ability to predict the outcome of their actions and perform effective action. In other words, the villains often created a sense of ontological insecurity both through their *modus operandi* and through the ways in which their own psychologies defined rational logic and were therefore often unreadable and hence unpredictable.

In this way, these films work quite differently from the immediate legibility that Dana Polan claims to be central to the cinema of the 1940s, and while he acknowledges that the horror and science fiction films of the period might be seen as a deconstructive alternative to this dominant trend (Polan 1986), these films can hardly be seen as a minor deconstructive alternative but rather one of the key, if not the dominant, trends within the period. In the mid-1940s, for example, about a quarter to a third of the mainstream feature films were associated with horror by critics at the time.

In this way, the villains of the 'horror-thrillers' not only raised anxieties about one's ability to predict the patterns of everyday life but also the inner processes of the individual mind and, as Kracauer put it, "many a current melodrama suggests that normal and abnormal states of mind merge into each other imperceptibly and are hard to keep separate" (Kracauer 1946, 133). These films therefore raised doubts not only about one's ability to predict the outcome of one's own acts, but even of one's ability to determine one's own actions. In these films, both the villain and the victim often find it impossible to distinguish the self

from the other and many characters are explicitly subjects in crisis who no longer feel that they are the authors of their own actions. Many monsters literally turn out to be split personalities. For example, not only did the period feature numerous Jekyll and Hyde figures, many of whom were serial killers, but one of the major hits of the period was Val Lewton's *Cat People*, which featured a young woman who fears that a kiss will turn her into a vicious, murderous cat-woman. Similarly, Universal's major horror star of the period, Lon Chaney Jr. played a number of horror monsters but remained most directly associated with the figure of the wolf man.

In this way, the 1940s 'horror-thrillers' look very similar to the 'paranoid horror' that Tudor associates with the post-1960s, despite being one of key periods of what he terms 'secure horror' (Tudor 1989). In paranoid horror, Tudor argues, the distinction between the self and the other is obscured and the monstrous often erupts from within the individual's own mind or body, as in the case of body-horror. For this reason, he also argues that paranoid horror collapses the distinction between the three principle characters of secure horror – the hero, the monster and the victim – so that many paranoid horror films feature characters that are either victim-heroes or victim-monsters. Finally, Tudor claims that this inability to distinguish the self from other also creates a sense of doubt about the ability to successfully combat the monster and resolve matters. If the monster is an emergent feature of the self, then the self may be the problem rather than the solution; a situation that makes narrative closure difficult and results in the endings in which the monster wins, or matters are left open and uncertain, or in which any victory is at best provisional.

This article will therefore focus on a series of horror stars both to explore how their images relate the figures of the horror monster and/or villain, the gangster and the spy. However, these stars did not work in quite the same way as Dyer discusses (Dyer 1979). These stars did not usually articulate a relationship between their public and private lives and they were rarely mentioned in fan magazines such as *Photoplay*. Nonetheless, reviews and articles at the time clearly show that they had strong images as stars that extended beyond their individual films. They were associated with types of characters and roles, and while they were best known for their horror roles, they often played spies and gangsters and so demonstrated the relationship between these figures.

This can be seen in the case of Karloff and Lugosi (Jancovich and Brown 2013), and it should be remembered that it was not only Karloff's performance in crime films, *The Criminal Code* and *Graft*, that led to Whale choosing the actor for the role of Frankenstein's monster, but also that Karloff continued to play gangsters and spies long after he had achieved stardom and had become virtually synonymous with horror. In addition, a number of his films such as *The Walking Dead* and *Black Friday* explicitly merged the worlds of gangsters and monsters, while many of his horror villains, such as Dr Fu Manchu, were little more than criminal masterminds. If many of his gangsters suffer from mental problems, his monsters are also often the product of psychological problems: even Frankenstein's monster suffers from the effects of an 'abnormal' brain.

Similarly, Lugosi played a range of roles after his success as Dracula. He not only played assorted horror monsters, mad scientists, Zombie overlords and

deranged killers but also criminal masterminds, spies and gangsters, most of which were identified as having psychological problems. If his scientists were usually 'crazy' (A.D.S. 1932, 16), his character in the Frankenstein series, Ygor, was described as a 'mad cripple' (B.R.C. 1939, 9). Similarly, his spies, gangsters and criminal masterminds were usually 'mad men' who want to 'destroy the world' (A.D.S. 1932, 10), while his deranged killers were motivated by 'monomania' or other psychological problems (T.M.P. 1941, 21).

However, by the late 1940s, Lon Chaney was the Universal's main horror star and he would play a series of tragic victim-monsters, men who feature that they have lost control of their minds and/or bodies. The first section of this article will therefore focus on Chaney and the tragically dominated figures with which he was associated, while the second section will move on to Laird Cregar, another actor who came to be associated with very similar dominated figures, even though his films were examples of the more respectable quality horror films of the period rather than the lowbrow Universal productions in which Chaney starred. The following two sections then move on to examine Lionel Atwill and George Zucco, stars who were not associated with tragically dominated characters but rather with dominators, characters who were driven by a psychological desire to dominate their worlds.

**'The Innocent Victim of a Diabolical Experiment': Lon Chaney, Psychological Domination and the Figure of the Victim-Monster**

If many of Lon Chaney Jr.'s characters were afflicted by psychological problems, these problems were rarely the megalomania that so often underpinned the characters of Karloff and Lugosi. On the contrary, he often portrayed tragic figures, men who were the victim of forces beyond their control (as in the case of *The Wolf Man*). Consequently, while many have seen him as a wooden or mechanical performer,<sup>i</sup> his characters were often no more than tragic, if tortured, hulks who were motivated by external forces such as arbitrary curses, pagan priests, and mad scientists.

This sense that he was not his own man was also a feature of his other roles; and, at the same time that he was starring in the Universal horror films, he was still playing in gangster films and westerns. In these films, which were often lower budget efforts than his 1940s horror films, he rarely achieved star billing and was cast as mere henchmen or gang members, characters who did not act on their own behalf but merely did the bidding of others.

Furthermore, his breakthrough role was that of Lennie, in the film *Of Mice and Men* (1939). Although often dismissed as a poor actor, Chaney's performance as Lennie was widely praised at the time and usually receives positive recognition today. In later life he would complain that the role typecast him:

It haunts me ... I get a call to play a dumb guy and the director tells me not to be Lennie but he's never happy until I play the part like Lennie. Then he doesn't know why he likes it. (Lon Chaney Jr. quoted in Brosnan 1976, 23)

Indeed, Lennie bares many features of his later roles: he is slow-witted 'on account of having being kicked in the head by a horse' and he is also a tragic character, who

can't act independently and relies on his best friend, George, to guide him. He is even a victim of his own body, like the Wolf Man, although in this case his problem is that he doesn't know his own strength and is therefore unable to control himself, a predicament that results in tragedy when he accidentally kills a young woman.<sup>ii</sup>

Like Karloff and Lugosi, then, he played a range of roles outside horror, particularly in westerns, roles that were linked by similar psychological issues. For example, in his first major horror role, he is seen as a mere victim, a puppet dominated and controlled by another: he is 'the innocent victim of a diabolical experiment by Dr Lionel Atwill, who is nuts' (Crowther 1941, 25). Not only is Atwill's character a mad scientist but also Chaney's problem is a complete lack of volition: 'First, the doctor shoots him full of high voltage so that he rivals TVA. Then the playful doctor suggests that he commit murder, and he does.' However, when not under the command of this scientist, Chaney's character is not free but 'goes wandering about the earth', a lost soul without any sense of will or even self.

By the time of *The Wolf Man* (1941), Chaney was the victim of a curse that doomed him to transform into a vicious werewolf, a fate from which only death could save him. In other words, Chaney played a man who had not only lost control of his own body but was also a split personality. Indeed, his werewolf was explicitly described as 'a sort of Mr. Hyde badly in need of a shave' (T.S. 1941, 24) and, by the time of his third film as the Wolf Man, *House of Dracula* (1945), Chaney's wolf man was clearly diagnosed as one that can be cured by 'tampering with the brain' (T.M.P. 1945, 16).

The success of *The Wolf Man* persuaded Universal to try him in other roles and, in *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), he played Frankenstein's monster, whose problem was still diagnosed as being a mental one that could be solved by a brain transplant, even if 'sinister Lionel Atwill' interferes with the procedure and 'removes the brain from Bela Lugosi [who played the evil hunchback Ygor] and pops it into him' (Crowther 1942, 19). Lon Chaney Jr.'s performance as the Mummy also had him 'a shriveled of face and *murderous of mind*' (my emphasis) as previous incarnations but little more than the agent of 'a devoted society of Egyptian priests' (T.S. 1942, 19)

Even in *Son of Dracula* (1943), his vampire lacks the dominating force usually associated with Dracula or his progeny. Rather than portraying the victimization of young women, the film features 'a twist to the ghoulish goings on' in which the vampire 'acquires a spouse', and it is his wife that is the dominating figure (A. W. 1943, 16). Not only does she bring the vampire to America but it soon transpires that this woman is simply using Lon Chaney Jr.'s vampire for her own nefarious schemes and that he is simply an instrument of her will, not vice versa. The marketing campaign even relegated Lon Chaney to the background of many posters and while the wife dominates both the posters image and its tagline: 'Temptress of Terror! The vampire's bride with blood on her lips!'

However, it was with the Inner Sanctum series that Lon Chaney Jr.'s horror films most explicitly associated horror with the psychological. In *Calling Dr Death* (1943), a story involving 'murder, psychiatry, hypnosis' (A.W. 1944, 11), Chaney plays 'a prominent neurologist' whose wife 'is found brutally slain', a situation in



which he 'suspects that he committed the crime in a moment of self-hypnosis' and starts 'reassembling his mental jigsaw' in an attempt to solve the mystery of the murder. Again, we have a story of a man who fears that he has lost control of his own mind, a feature of other films in the series. By *Pillow of Death* (1945), one review observed that it 'probably won't surprise anyone to report that another psychopathic killer is loose' in this addition to the series (T.M.P. 1946, 19). The film is therefore claimed to feature both a 'maniac' and 'an old plot line'.

**'A Shade on the Psychopathic Side': Compulsion, Self Destruction and the films of Laird Cregar**

In this way, Chaney showed strong similarities with Laird Cregar, another large actor who was 'haunted by his homosexuality' (Newman 1996, 81). Although he died young, and played a range of roles, Cregar found his niche playing 'twisted villains' and it has been claimed that he was 'ideally cast as tortured psychopaths' in films such as *The Lodger* and *Hangover Square* (Newman 1996, 181). For Newman, Cregar was a 'haunted' figure while, for Thomson, he 'is at his best as a cultivated man possessed by evil' (Thomson 2002, 187). Consequently, although he played a range of non-horror roles, this sense of being oppressed, tortured and dominated by dark forces was central to many of his parts. In *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), for example, he is described as 'a shade on the psychopathic side' as a 'detective inspector' who is therefore 'too easy to spot' as the villain (Crowther 1942, 13) and, in *Joan of Paris* (1942), his performance as 'the head of the Paris secret police' is positively described as 'thoroughly repulsive' (Crowther 1942, 18). Not only did I

*Wake Up Screaming* strongly suggest its association with horror through its title (which was changed in the UK where horror a problem for the censors) but it was also an adaptation of one of the key horror writers of the period, Cornell Woolrich.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, *Joan of Paris* was described as featuring ‘fearful uncertainties’ and ‘one of the most sinister villains of the season’, an ‘evil visaged secret agent’ who ‘terrifyingly’ pursues the heroes.

However, it was *The Gun for Hire* (1942) that really showcased him as a mentally disturbed heavy. Not only was the film described as ‘morbid’ and ‘hair-raising’ (Crowther 1942, 23) but Cregar plays an industrialist who is ‘engaged in the manufacture of poison gas for “the enemy.”’ Furthermore, he is not just a traitor, ‘a double portion of deceit and cowardice’, he also has a strange compulsiveness. Early on he asks paid killer, Raven, how he feels after a killing to which Raven responds that he feels ‘fine’. As one review noted, this response should have been ‘warning enough ... not to double cross [Raven] on the payment of his killer’s fee’, but ‘Mr. Cregar does double cross him, and thereby hangs the tale.’ The question itself suggests a fascination with the killer on the part of Cregar’s industrialist, and an ambivalence about the practice of crime, but his decision to betray Raven seems to be more than mere arrogance and tantamount to a death wish.

Later films featured Cregar as a ‘brutal’ major ‘whose sole aim is to break the spirits’ of his men with little justification beyond sheer perversity (T.M.P., 1942: 23), and as a ‘tyrannical art dealer’ (Crowther 1942, 25). In *The Black Swan* (1942), he played Sir Henry Morgan, a former pirate who achieves ‘a temporary return to grace as Governor of Jamaica’ and sets about trying ‘to sweep an unrepentant henchman,

Billy Leech, from the seas' (T.S. 1942, 18). The film was dismissed as 'hokum' but 'hokum' that would please 'a good many small boys' and 'a lot of grown ups ... too', being the kind of film in which 'the villains have a gay old time of it' and Cregar 'bellows oaths like an irate Opera singer'. He even played the devil in *Heaven Can Wait* (1943).

However, it was as Jack the Ripper in *The Lodger* (1944) – and as a similar 'homicidal maniac' in *Hangover Square* (1945) – that he made his mark. The former was clearly 'designed to chill the spine' and featured Cregar as a 'maniacal killer' who is eventually killed when Scotland Yard 'pours more bullets into the murderer than even Frankenstein's monster was ever asked to absorb' (T.M.P. 1944, 15). The association with Frankenstein's monster clearly identifies this as little more than a lavish horror film that requires Cregar to 'continually go around trying to scare the delights out of everyone.'

By the release of *Hangover Square*, Cregar was already dead but judgments on the film were very similar. Despite its 'plushy replica of a rich turn-of-the-century English home', the film is seen as a 'horror film' in which Cregar plays a 'schizophrenic genius', who transforms from 'brilliant composer' to 'homicidal maniac' (T.M.P. 1945, 15). Furthermore, his 'blank, murderous spells' are signaled by 'wild grimaces' and 'clutches at his neck in a manner reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster.' However, as one review complained, rather than sending 'chills coursing up and down your spine', the film lacked a single 'first class shiver.' *Hangover Square*, like *The Lodger*, features Cregar as a tragic and sympathetic figure, a man overwhelmed by psychological compulsions over which he has no control.

While many psychological killers gain excitement and pleasure from their perverse drives, both Chaney's and Cregar's characters were often dismayed and horrified by their psychological compulsions, and rather than conveying a sense of perverse energy, they more usually displayed a sense of paralysis. Unable to trust themselves, they became tortured, frozen and unable to perform effective action.

### **'Dr. Lionel Atwill, Who is Nuts': Cruelty, Madness and Lionel Atwill**

If Chaney and Cregar played characters who were dominated and controlled, Lionel Atwill often played a dominating presence, and although the article on his death in the *New York Times* claimed that he 'became one of the most famous of America's screen villains, filling most of his roles in "horror" films' (Anon 1946, 21), he appeared in a great range of films only a small portion of which would be seen as horror today. However, his strong association with horror continues for a variety of reasons. For example, many of the roles that would not be identified as horror today were none the less identified with horror at the time and, even in films such as *Captain Blood* (1935), which were not identified as horror films at the time, his roles featured many of the attributes central to his horror roles.

In other words, Atwill frequently displayed a sense of haughty arrogance or pomposity that was often seen as a form of monstrous megalomania or ludicrous self-aggrandizement. In *Song of Songs* (1933), a 'somewhat conventional story of a woman's collapse', Atwill plays a 'cunning' Baron with 'grossness, pomp and sly humour' (A.D.S. 1933, 22), while in *Nana* (1934), he is cast as 'haughty colonel Muffat' (Hall 1934, 20). If these roles demonstrate the self-aggrandizement of many

Atwill characters, *Captain Blood* captures his darker side, a film in which he plays 'the cruel Governor of Port Royal' against whose sadistic domination Blood and his pirates rebel, and whom they eventually overthrow (Sennwald 1935, 14).

Cruelty was so central to many of his characters that, in its review of *Son Of Frankenstein* (1939), the *New York Times* asked its readers to imagine, 'if you can, a picture ... so mean you feel sorry for Lionel Atwill' (B.R.C. 1939, 9). Moreover, this cruelty was usually seen as a symptom of something deeper, the megalomania that was central to many of his villains. As a review of *The Strange Case of Dr Rx* (1942) observed, the film 'merely confirms the fact that mad doctors, mad scientists and mad inventors all have God-complexes and singularly murderous impulses' (T.S. 1942, 11). If in this case (despite his 'leers') Lionel Atwill turns out not to be the mad scientist, the film also confirms another aspect of Atwill's presence: 'According to custom in these and similar affairs, Lionel Atwill is either (1) the guilty party or (2) the red herring (guess which if you feel playful)' (B.R.C. 1939, 12).

Elsewhere, however, Atwill's vicious desire for domination is explicit. In *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), Atwill is 'an insane wax modeler' who threatens the heroine and others 'so that he can fashion wax figures from them' (Hall 1933, 13). In other words, he views others as mere instruments for the realization of his art. Alternatively, in *Murders in the Zoo* (1933), he is an 'insanely jealous husband' who, 'in the opening scene', is 'shown in the act of destroying his wife's lover in an Indian jungle. Having sewed the wretch's lips together with thread [he] leaves the fellow to perish miserably among the pythons and tigers' (A.D.S. 1933, 13)

Of course, although a zoologist, this madman is little more than a deranged killer, and along side mad scientists such as the one who dominates Lon Chaney in *Man Made Monster* (1941), and transplants his brain in *Ghost of Frankenstein*, Atwill played a range of other parts. In *Lady of Secrets* (1936), he was a ‘merciless father’ (B.R.C 1936, 12); in *Stamboul Quest* (1934), he was ‘the head of the German counter-espionage bureau’ (F.S.N. 1934, 16); and in *The Sun Never Sets* (1939), he was an ‘incipient world-dictator named Zurof’ (Nugent 1939, 26). If these roles might seem to extend beyond Atwill’s horror films, it is worth noting that, in *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1943), where Holmes combats a ‘Nazi spy ring’ that is headed by ‘none other than Holmes’s ancient antagonist, Moriarty’, the *New York Times* wasn’t fooled: Moriarty might be a criminal mastermind in earlier incarnations, and the head of a Nazi spy ring in this film, but it was still ‘just Lionel Atwill in professional garb’ (T.S. 1943, 15). In other words, the criminal mastermind and Nazi spy ring were in no sense strangers to the world of 1940s horror, particularly when played by actors such as Atwill.

However, even in horror films, Atwill was not always a villain. In *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), he was the town mayor, a figure who remembered the menace of the Frankensteins and, in *The Vampire Bat* (1933), *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), *Son of Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Doctor Rx*, he played a policeman or some other type of criminal investigator. Even in *Doctor X* (1932) and *Secret of the Blue Room* (1933), murder mysteries that were clearly identified as horror films, he is ‘out to find the culprit’ despite the menace and suspicion that surrounds him (Hall 1932, 17).

### **'Another Maniacal Scientist': Mastery and Control in the Films of George Zucco**

Like Atwill, George Zucco was another 'poor man's mad scientist' (Newman 1996, 352), an alternative to Karloff and Lugosi whose characters often yearned for mastery and domination. But while Atwill often evoked an air of pomposity, Zucco's performances were often distinguished by a wicked gleam in the eyes that suggested a sense of humorous glee. The *New York Times* therefore observed of his performance in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* that 'one can't help liking Moriarty ... dastard that he is' (Nugent 1939, 20). Similarly, he was described as a 'most hissable man' in *Arrest Bulldog Drummond* (Nugent 1939, 27)

Also, while Atwill was seen as a rival to Karloff as early as 1933, Zucco not only came to horror late in the 1930s but was often consigned to low budget productions that the *New York Times* did not even bother to review or played too minor a role to receive much attention. Nonetheless, he played in enough major releases to develop a reputation and his roles in these films still covered a range of different figures.

If Moriarty is a criminal mastermind, he is also a Gothic villain, of whom it was claimed that he not only induces 'terror' in the leading lady but that it is 'delightful the way the fog follows [him] around' (Nugent 1939, 20). In addition to this role, Zucco also appeared in a number of murder mysteries that were clearly marketed as horror films or associated with them in other ways. *Fast Company* (1938), for example, was shown at Arthur Mayer's 'monastic Rialto', New York's 'chamber of horrors', and it featured Zucco as a book collector who meets a 'gory

fate' (Nugent 1938, 21). Elsewhere it has been demonstrated that the term mystery was not restricted to the 'who-dun-it' but had a larger meaning that suggested the eerie and the uncanny and was therefore largely synonymous with horror (Jancovich 2005). Consequently, Zucco not only appeared as criminals and victims but, like Atwill, as sinister suspects in films such as *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* (1938) and the *Cat and the Canary* (1938), the remake of an 'old shocker' that took 'full advantage of the standard chiller devices for frightening the susceptibles of [its] audience' (Nugent 1939, 38). It was therefore described as one of a series of 'mystery melodramas laid in old dark houses' and as featuring 'screams [that] would put a traffic snarl in Times Square'.

In other films, he plays neither victims nor suspects but investigators. *Lured* (1947), for example, starred Lucille Ball as a young woman 'who is drafted by Scotland Yard to be the bait in trapping a character who specializes in killing pretty girls' (E.J.B. 1947, 14). In other words, this killer is a deranged psychopath, and Zucco plays a Scotland Yard inspector assigned to protect her.

However, it was as villains that Zucco excelled and, as can be seen, even when he was not the villain, his presence was usually sinister and threatening, even if he was later vindicated. Consequently, he became best known for his 'salacious old priest' in the Mummy films (T.S. 1940, 27), in which he played the figure that dominated and controlled the Mummy that would later be played by Lon Chaney Jr. In these films, he was charged with 'guarding [ancient mysteries] against the incursions of an archeological expedition' and used the Mummy as an instrument of vengeance upon those who defiled these mysteries. Moreover, the films were shown



in New York at the Rialto, whose owner, Arthur Mayer, was described, very much like a Zucco character, as a 'guardian of the ghouls' (T.S. 1940. 27)

*The Mad Ghoul* (1943) also featured Zucco and told the story of 'just another poor unfortunate who has been turned into a walking fiend by another maniacal scientist' (B.C. 1943, 11). Like his high priests, this scientist therefore dominates a young man and turns him into an instrument of his will: the young man is converted into a zombie without the capacity for independent action. *The Monster and the Girl* (1941) also cast Zucco as a mad scientist, but if this film was claimed to 'have exhumed the old affair of the scientist and the simian with the transplanted brain' (T.S. 1941, 25), a plot device that was clearly seen as not simply old but dead and buried, it also told a story of vengeance. The brain transplanted into the ape is that of an innocent young man that gangsters have framed; and this innocent uses the ape's body to exact his revenge upon those that had framed him.

If Zucco's mad scientists are egomaniacs who want to rule the world, it is therefore hardly surprising that he also played a number of Nazi villains during the period, too. *International Lady* (1941), for example, not only concerns Nazi agents but reviews even described them as a 'gang' who are controlled by evil masterminds or 'brains' (Crowther 1941, 29). *The Seventh Cross* (1944), on the other hand, was described as a 'hair-raising' story whose hero experiences 'primitive terror' when hunted by Nazi authorities (Crowther 1944, 18), while *My Favorite Blonde* (1942), like *The Cat and the Canary*, placed comedian Bob Hope in a situation in which he is 'scared to death' (Crowther 1942, 27). The story sets Hope up against Zucco and a gang of 'Nazi villains', a role in which Zucco was described as 'properly forbidding'.

Again critics read these films as having given a psychological interpretation to these roles. Obviously both the Nazis and high priests are not just villains but fanatics, driven by something more than rational motivations. Similarly, criminal masterminds such as Moriarty were not simply motivated by material gain, and their crimes serve a dark and disturbed desire for mastery and control. Rather than simply steal the crown jewels in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Moriarty ‘persists in declaring war on Scotland Yard rather than simply making it’: or rather he seems to spend more time taunting and challenging the police than with robbing the Tower of London, so the former seems to be his real obsession and the latter is merely means to an end (Nugent 1939, 20). From the start, not only does he tell Holmes that he is ‘about to commit the most incredible crime of my career’, he even ‘posts a letter to Sir Ronald Ramsgate, custodian of the crown jewels, advising him of his intention.’ Even then, ‘the “jools” in his grasp’, he chooses ‘to go chasing Holmes over the embrasures of the Tower of London’ rather than absconding with his loot. Furthermore, if Zucco’s scientists are ‘maniacal’ figures – and ‘most ghouls we’ve met in horror films have been more or less scatterbrained’ – other villains are figures of ‘monstrous skullduggery’ that require the intervention of a ‘psychosleuth’ to identify ‘the fiend’ (P.P.K. 1944, 16).

## **Conclusion**

One of the key problems with many studies of genre has been that, even when they reject essentialist definitions of genre, they tend to rely on teleological narratives.

Famously, Robin Wood provided a highly influential account of the horror genre

that presented a classic period in which the normality and the monstrous other were simply opposed, a period that was turned on its head after *Psycho*, when this opposition was undermined and the monster was revealed to be a product of normality rather than simply an external threat. Similarly, although Tudor takes issue with the kinds of essentialist attempts to define the horror genre of which Wood is an example, his 'cultural history' also assumes a shift from secure horror (in which the monster is largely external) to paranoid horror (in which the monster seems to emerge from within).

Furthermore, both these critics not only rely on a linear notion of film history, in which genres implicitly move towards greater reflexivity,<sup>iv</sup> but use the psychological horror film in which the monster is a serial killer that is motivated by uncontrollable compulsions as the exemplar of the horror film after 1960. However, as we have seen, horror stars of the 1940s demonstrate that the horror villain, gangster and spy were not only linked as figures prior to the 1960s, but that their link with one another was precisely due to their shared psychological issues. Both these figures and their victims experience a crisis of subjectivity in which they no longer seem to be the author of their own actions, and in which their actions seem to be the effect of forces over which they have no control, forces that challenge any sense of clear division between the internal and the external. In these films, characters find themselves unable to trust their self or their perceptions of the world around them.

However, such narratives are not simply a deconstructive alternative to a dominant Hollywood cinema of the time. On the contrary, these films constitute one

of the most productive cycles of 1940s filmmaking and reveal a sense of anxiety in the period. If Polan suggests that the dominant tendency within Hollywood cinema in the period was toward immediate legibility, he also suggests that this immediate legibility was meant to counter a profound sense of uncertainty about social life in the period, particularly uncertainty about the war, its outcome and its broader society impacts. The crisis of subjectivity and the desire for immediate legibility are therefore not opposed to one another but rather are two sides of the same coin. For example, one could clearly argue that the Sherlock Holmes films of the period were examples of immediate legibility in which it is clear from the outset that Holmes will resolve the mystery, but the films also stress the impossibility of his task and the mysteries do not simply challenge his intellect but seem to challenge reason itself. The conflict becomes one between the forces of reason and unreason so that films reveal their anxiety about the powers of reason, even when they seem to affirm the opposite.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, while Clarens claims that 'Chaney revealed himself as a monotonous actor of rather narrow range, possessing neither the voice or skill of Karloff nor the demonic persuasion of Lugosi' (Clarens 1967, 101), Gifford has similarly dismissed his Frankenstein's monster on the grounds that the 'performance had a robotic power, but lacks soul, even a man-made one' (Gifford 1973, 139).

<sup>ii</sup> This dynamic of dependence may relate to his private life, in which he is claimed to have had a difficult relationship to his father, Lon Chaney, which resulted in a desperate need for father figures, just as the sense of him as being prey to forces beyond his control has been linked to supposed struggles with homosexuality and alcoholism (see Smith 1996).

<sup>iii</sup> Woolrich may not be remembered as a horror writer today but he was clearly identified with the genre in the 1940s when most of his books, and the films adapted from those books, were marketed and reviewed as horror tales.

<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore this linear view of history is an 'epochal' one in which history is seen a series of periods separated by breaks rather than a process of development. It should also be noted that many of these accounts use *Psycho* to mark the break, although some see the film as a cause and others as a symptom so demonstrating very different notions of historical causality: Tudor clearly associates the shift from secure to paranoid with specific social changes, while Wood hovers between a social explanation and one that attributes this shift to the innovation of Alfred Hitchcock as an auteur. Certainly, Wood implies that the social changes and Hitchcock's innovation are connected, but he never gives a clear sense of the processes of mediation involved.