Hollywood Horror: Europe As American Dystopia

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Abstract

The history of film narratives is impossible to separate from a historical context in which the ideological production of myth and genre occur. This has for example been invaluable in the understanding of film genres such as the Western. However, the consideration of a historical context is sorely absent from nearly all of the studies that have been written on the horror genre. The purpose of my forthcoming dissertation on classical horror cinema – introduced by *Dracula* in 1931 and ending in poignant poetic irony with *Dracula's Daughter* in 1936 – is to to introduce such a reading. Genre is seen in the essay as an indication of the change in political, economical and cultural relations between America and Europe. These symbolically charged relationships are usually analyzed from the European perspective, looking at the USA and its culture. I intend to reverse that perspective. Not only can we then see the shift in the claim for world domination between the European colonialism of the 19th century and the American imperialism of the 20th century but also notice how this affects the cultural rhetoric across the Atlantic.

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A Shift in the Power Relations

The 20th century has been a distinctly American one, although it was already in the last decades of the 19th century that the rise of American ambitions in world politics and global economy began. Cheaply made industrial goods of high quality—many of them from American patents—flooded the world market: typewriters, telephones, cameras, sewing machines, phonographs, toothpaste etc. Wherever they competed with European consumer goods—usually made in old-fashioned, craft-oriented factories—they won out easily.

By 1913, the year before the first world war, the USA had already become the largest economy in the world, producing one third of its industrial output. This is the same figure as the combined total of the European super powers France, Germany and Great Britain. Fifteen years later

the USA produced over 42 per cent of the total industrial output in the world market, while the three European nations produced 28 per cent. The stock market in New York became the most important in the world, and all over the globe American industries established production plants and distribution agencies.

Before the first world war the USA was a debtor country. During the war it soon became the leading creditor. The European super powers were in ruins, forced to rely on America as creditor and investor. The rise of American economic, political and soon cultural dominance aroused hostility in Europe. A trade war started with export and import restrictions and tariffs, dumping of prices and other means to gain advantages in the world market.

Most importantly the first world war, the rise of American imperialism at the expense of European colonialism and the dramatic increase of wealth in the USA made way for a profound shift in how Americans looked upon themselves, their nation and its destiny in world politics.

At the turn of the 20th century the USA had just seen 124 years of independence. The New World obviously lacked something upon which most countries in the Old one established their sense of identity: a history. Consequently many from the American East Coast-dominated political and financial establishment looked upon Europe as their home, at least in a cultural sense.

Intellectuals, artists, sports fans, and capitalists crossed the Atlantic in great numbers looking for what they considered was their cultural heritage in the museums, universities, monuments, and sports arenas in Western Europe. They cultivated a European sophistication and filled their houses with furniture and art from across the Atlantic.

Of course, there was always the seed of mistrust across the Atlantic, since the New World essentially was constructed by the unpriviliged masses rising against the colonial powers of the Old. In drama (for example: Robert Montgomery Bird's popular play *The Gladiator*, about Spartacus's rebellion against the Roman Empire) and literature (for example: Henry James's novels *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*) this is evoked in allegorical narratives, but it is mainly among descendants from religious or political refugees, in the press and in the popular mass culture that another view of Europe was held. Here Europe was perceived as a decadent, cor-

rupted place, a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, a civilization in decay, doomed to self-destruction by its own vices. (This is of course also represented allegorically in the biblical epics of the 1950s, where the decadent Romans are all played by British actors and the—mostly Christian—rebels by Americans.)

Already some of the founding fathers of the USA—Thomas Jefferson and James Madison—explicitly warned about the construction of big cities like those in Europe. They feared that this artificial environment was a hothouse for social hostilities, moral decay and political corruption. And already here—in founding the new nation—Americans made use of Europe as the antithesis against which they constructed a national, chauvinistic and morally righteous identity. In short, Europe was seen by many Americans as a manifestation of everything they didn't want their nation to be. This is not a phenomenon unique to Transatlantic relation, but can be found in many international relationships between competing military alliances or nations, for instance in the Danish-Swedish relations during their struggle for supremacy in Scandinavia.

Utopia / Dystopia

However, the American vision of Europe goes beyond the question of cultural supremacy and has more profound social and political implications. Here the concept of America is synonymous with utopia locked in a dichotomy with Europe as dystopia. The American utopia was consequently situated as far away from Europe as possible, in the post-civil war frontier west of Mississipi. There, in what was perceived as virgin territories, the USA claimed to have found its Garden of Eden, waiting to bring a regeneration to the European immigrants, transforming them in battle with the Indian savages into a new-born race of self-made aristocrats— i. e. the true Americans.

This national myth—most adequately and poetically examined by the American English professor Richard Slotkin in his trilogy of books: *Regeneration of Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985) and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992)—became even more popular with the disappearance of the real

frontier in the late 19th century, and captured as a popular genre the imagination of both Americans and Europeans after the turn of the century. And as a brutal savagery seemed to lie beneath the façade of European sophistication, disclosing itself most nakedly in the first world war, American isolationism and chauvinism flourished, permeating the social hierarchy.

As the Western in books and films became the most popular genre, so the frontier myth came to be redefined for an industrial era. Thus industrial production was made into a matter of national interest to all classes. Rather than using words like 'exploitation' or 'profit' the rethoric on American industrial endeavors emphasized the terms 'productivity' and 'prosperity'. Modernity and economic prosperity became the new American frontiers. The American professor of history, Richard Pells, writes in his book *Not like US*:

> The polarities were simple yet compelling. America embodied youthfulness, vigor, confidence, optimism, freedom, and (once the wilderness was conquered) prosperity and modernity. Europe represented deviousness, cynicism, corruption, decadence, fatigue, poverty, social and ideological conflict war. This type of discourseæself-congratulatory, heavily moralistic, serene in its conviction that America was good and Europe was evilæhad grown familiar by the early nineteenth century and remained central to America's image of itself as a real and symbolic alternative to Europe throughout the twentieth century.
> /…/
> In between the two world wars the USA under president (and historian) Woodrow Wilson initially through the League of Nations tried to make a cause for democracy in Europe. He also negotiated treaties between countries by using the states within USA as a template for how a quilt of European nations should administer their relations. Needless to say this was to no use, and by the end of the 1920s even the most fervently defenders of close American relations with Europe were in despair. When the threat of war once more grew strong—this time triggered by the rise of fascism and totalitarian dictatorship in Europe—isolationsm in America became a mass movement.

Hollywood As National Culture

If the 20th century is an American one then what better to represent it than the movies made in Hollywood during its heyday between 1915 and1948, produced in close cooperation with the government. The ties to the political establishment officially started in 1917 just after the USA sent troops to the European trenches of the first world war. The Committee on Public Information—better known as The Creel Committee after its chairman, George Creel—made use of journalists, authors, artists and others to create a propaganda machine for the American cause.

The export of American films now had a clearly defined ideological purpose, making way for an American life style through American consumer products. Even then you could already talk about product placing of cars, telephones, fashion and other items that both Americans and people all over the world would take notice of. The idea—brilliantly summarized in history professor Emily Rosenberg's book *Spreading the American Dream*—was that the spreading of an American life style and American products would result in fundamental changes from within other societies as well as reinforcing democracy within the USA. Underlying the liberal, free-trade policy of American governments since the late 1800s is the notion that capitalism unleashed would transcend any borders—national, social, financial—and be an inspiration for democracy, prosperity and peace to people all over the world.

Mass produced consumer goods from America were believed to be obtainable even for people living in poverty, and their inherent promise of a rise of a modern and democratic society would break down social hierchies and old feudalism. A new, democratically inclined middle class would further boost international capitalism and free trade. The result: intertwined economies between nations under a *Pax Americana*, since essentially citizens all over the world adopting an American life style and consuming American goods would be transformed into Americans, embracing the American dream.

As long as the war lasted American propaganda through newsreels, documentaries and feature films was relatively simple and unproblematic. Mostly it was produced to whip up national sentiments against the enemy. Trade blockades effectively hindered the export of Hollywood films to many

countries, so the films catered to a predominantly American audience. The captivity narrative from the Western genre, where blood-thirsty Indians prowled about looking for white women to abduct and rape, transformed into very popular hate-the-hun-films. The first one, *The Little American* (1917), significantly casted America's sweetheart Mary Pickford in the role of a sexually threatened American girl. In the film she is saved by allied troops from a child-murdering, sex-crazed German soldier, but on the way home on the ship Veritania (AKA Lusitania). She is again threatened when a German submarine emerges launching its torpedoes.

The following year, 1918, saw out-and-out propaganda stunts such as *To Hell With the Kaiser* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*, on which the poster to the film—featuring a caricatur drawing of the German emperor—had a text that informed the reader: "Warning! Any persons throwing mud at this poster will not be prosecuted". And this was of course the year that Erich von Stroheim started out his short but brilliant career as the Prussian man-you-love-to-hate in the film *The Hun Within*.

Between Wars

After the war the situation changed, but although the Creel Committee ceased to exist a close association between the American government and Hollywood continued and flourished. The European film industry was in ruins, and Hollywood quickly moved into the leading position using the same methods that other American industries had done one or two decades before: instead of selling off distribution rights, they opened their own distribution agencies all over the world. In many countries they also bought or opened new cinemas. Thus the Hollywood companies took a firm control over their products.

Marketing American films, life style and culture in Europe wasn't that hard after the first world war. Not only intellectuals and artists looked towards the New World as a cultural alternative to the moral bankruptcy of the Old. For decades there had among a mass audience been fascination for the Western genre, as can be witnessed by the sale of millions of books by Karl May. Now with a national pride strengthened by the fact that it had

become the most powerful nation in the world, the American film industry launched the formerly Western films on an epic scale, starting with the huge succes of *The Covered Wagon* in 1923, directed by James Cruze, the son of Danish Mormons settled in Utah, and coming to a peak with the Oscar-awarded *Cimarron* in 1930.

Producing and selling films for the world market had the advantages of reaping higher profits and consequently being able to stage more lavish productions than any other national film industry could possibly afford. The drawback was however that Hollywood grew to be dependent on the profits from other markets. Soon lobbyists for ethnic minorities, cultural attachées and so-called consultants with ties to the political establishment in their home countries flocked the Hollywood studios demanding that they should be given the right to censor whatever they would find outrageous. Americans with Irish and Italian origin complained about stereotyping in gangster films, Mexicans complained about stereotyping in Westerns, the French complained about everything, even when their colonial battles using the Foreign Legion were heroically portrayed in a number of Hollywood films in the late 1920s.

At the same time public opinion within the still most important home market became more and more hostile towards anything not American. So-called dangerous aliens—socialists, bolsheviks, anarchists and others that were defined as undesirables—became explicitly prohibited to immigrate to the USA after a few novel acts regulating immigration in 1917. In fact, a few hundred were deported in infamous raids by American District Attorney Mitchell Palmer in 1919 and 1920. This new hostility was fuelled especially by William Randolph Hearst's press. It started in the 1890s with the coining of the "Yellow Peril", an alien threat that soon included atheism, communism, free love, trade unions etc. Many were explained away as imported evils from the Old World. And so the term 'un-American' was born.

Heart's press was fervent in its plea for American isolationism. Frequently, the bickering among the Eurpean nations and the political unstability even within former Allies of the USA such as France was portrayed with stinging sarcasm. With the rise of fascism and the great number of immigrants turning their back on their former home countries, embracing the American culture wholeheartedly, isolationism and chauvinism in the USA

grew even stronger. During most of the 1920s Hollywood satisfied this isolationist audience at home at the same time avoiding export and censorship restrictions in Europe by placing any potentially sensitive narrative or threatening power either in countries that were negligible from a political or economic view (Russia, China) or in fictional countries, often in absurd, operetta-like kingdoms in Balkan, Eastern and Central Europe.

Here America aligned itself with the former colonial opressor, Great Britain. This was a process that had started in the late 1800s as America itself became a colonial and imperialist power. President Teddy Roosevelt had once stressed the similarities between the American frontier in savage Indian territories and the British colonial frontier in savage territories in Africa and Asia. The struggle was always between the superior so-called progressive and inferior so-called regressive races, and in this the American and the British Empires were allies. From British literature Hollywood took its inspiration to stage the frontier in Central and Eastern Europe in countries like Ruritania, Bourduria and Syldavia.

The love affair between Hollywood and the British Empire flourished in the 1930s. This was the time of Imperial Westerns, such as *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) and *Gunga Din* (1939). In the new talkies many British actors became American stars because of their vocal abilities. And of course many novels from British literature were made into films.

Horror Film

One genre to benefit greatly from the British influence was the horror film, since many of them were drawn from or very much influenced by British literature: *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Bride of Frankenstein* and so on. Interestingly the horror genre appeared at the same moment as the Western genre was in temporary decline. Film historians often relate to the Depression as one explanation of these two simultaneous phenomena, and it is easy to see that the utopian genre of the Western faded away for a few years for the same reason as the satires on European decadence were transformed into a dystopian horror

genre. This was a terrifying time, when European fascism and militarism stood strong while the formerly superior American economy collapsed. The threat from Europe was not just a military one, but one of social and political disease. And the isolationists warned: America had to protect itself.

Looking at the classical horror films from 1931 to 1936, taking into account the extensive historical context summarized above, it is very likely that the audience—consciously or not—read them as morality plays with a stern political message about the European horrors. Some of the best known films in the genre were directed by European exiles—Karl Freund, James Whale, Edgar G Ulmer—who, like other exiles, turned their back on Europe, fervently embracing American culture and ideals. (Others were: Fritz Lang, Marlene Dietrich, Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann, and hundreds of less well known workers in film. Significantly many of them refused even to speak their native tongue as if that would associate them with their origin.)

One clear-cut example is about an American couple on honeymoon in a truly horrifying Europe. The title of the film is *The Black Cat* (1934). It was directed by the Austrian-born, ex-German production designer and director Edgar G Ulmer, and scripted by Ulmer and American novelist Peter Ruric. I will give you a brief synopsis followed by some remarks about the film.

The Black Cat

Immediately after their wedding, mystery novelist Peter Alison and his wife Joan go on a honeymoon to Hungary on the Orient Express. When the train leaves the station in Budapest, they are persuaded to accommodate another passenger, Hungarian psychiatrist Dr Vitus Werdegast, in their compartment. Later that night, Werdegast talks, with surpressed pain and anger, about his parting from his wife 18 years ago when he enlisted in the army to fight in the Great War. Three years later he was later taken prisoner by the Russians, and subsequently spent 15 years in the dreaded prison of Kurgaal in Omsk. Now, after his release, he intends to go to Gömbös,

where he will seek out his old friend and war comrade, architect Hjalmar Poelzig, to inquire about the whereabouts of his wife and daughter. As it happens, Gömbös is also where the Alisons are heading for their first stop.

In the train station outside Gömbös they are met by Werdegast's personal servant Thamal, and they all share a taxi bus to the town by way of Poelzig's house. While driving by night on muddy roads in the heavy storm, the driver reveals that Poelzig's house is built on the Austrian-Hungarian Fort Marmaros by a battlefield, where thousands of soldiers were killed. His story is interrupted when the bus skids off the road and crashes close to Poelzig's house. The driver is killed, and Joan is slightly injured and has fainted. Peter decides to accept Werdegast's offer to take Joan to Poelzigs house for the night. Arriving there, they are met with cold hospitality by the host, who seem only to take an interest in the young bride.

As soon as they are alone, Werdegast confronts Poelzig with his crimes of the past. It turns out that Poelzig was the commanding officer of Marmaros, but betrayed his own country and soldiers to the Russians, thereby sending Werdegast and the few survivors of the slaughter that followed to an infernal imprisonment at Kurgaal, "where the soul is killed slowly". Madly in love with Werdegast's wife, Karen, Poelzig then tricked her into a marriage as she believed her husband to be dead, and left with her and her daughteræwho also is named Karenæfor America. He then returned to build his house on the ruins of the old fortress, which he himself had been an instrument in destroying.

When Peter joins the two former friendsænow arch enemiesæthe argument is interrupted by the shadow of a black cat that terrifies Werdegast, who immediately kills the creature by throwing a knife. Poelzig ascribes his fears to aelurophobia, but Werdegast himself explains that the cat, in old beliefs, is considered an incarnation of evil. Later in the night Poelzig calls on Werdegast, guiding him through the cellaræthe remaining parts of Marmarosæinto a mausoleum of dead women, erected like statues in glass coffins. Standing at Karen's coffin, Poelzig explains that she died two years after the war and that the daughter has also died.

Not believing Poelzig, Dr Werdegast draws a pistol, but is again interrupted by a black cat that paralyzes him with fear. Mockingly, Poelzig tricks Werdegast to accept "a game of death", whereby Joan's fate will be decided. They agree on playing chess for her life. If Werdegast wins she

will be free, but if Poelzig wins she will become a virgin sacrifice at his next Satanist cult meeting, where he is the master of ceremonies. But Peter senses trouble and decides the next day to leave the house with Joan, even if it means they have to walk all the way to their hotel. However, at the door they are brutally stopped by Thamal, who strikes Peter down and throws him in a prison cell in the old Marmaros cellar. Joan faints and is taken back to her room to be locked in.

Having lost the chess game, Werdegast pretends to play along with the deal he made with Poelzig, but in secret he confides to Joan that he and Thamal are just biding their time in order to strike at their enemy. At the Satanist mass Joan is presented to be sacrificed, but is freed by Werdegast and Thamal. Meanwhile, Peter has broken out of his prison cell, but is struck unconscious by Poelzig's servant. During the escape through the cellars of Marmaros, Thamal is shot in a fight with Poelzig's servant, whom he kills.

Joan tells Werdegast the truth about his wife and daughter, and they soon find (daughter) Karen dead in a room nearby, presumably killed by Poelzig. This drives Werdegast mad for revenge. Aided by his dying servant he overpowers Poelzig, tying him to an embalming rack, and proceeds to skin him alive in front of a terrified Joan. Hearing the cries of terror, Peter rushes to his wife's rescue, and, mistaking Werdegast's help for a threat against Joan, he shoots the psychiatrist. Dying, Werdegast sends the young couple away. Then he ignites the old dynamite that has been left in storage from the war, blowing up the entire place.

On the train back to Budapest, Peter and his wife read a review of his latest mystery novel: *Triple-murder*. At first the review seems favorable, but the novel's plot is dismissed by the critic as too incredible.

About The Black Cat

This was truly a special event, since it was the first time that Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi acted in the same film. Originally the film was inspired by events in France, but it was probably considered too sensitive and so it was transformed into a tale of savagery at the Hungarian border with Russia. It

was an image of the depraved Old World cinema audiences were familiar with, and it probably also helped that Bela Lugosi could make use of his native tongue. As in some other horror films (*The Mask of Fu Manchu*, *The Mummy*) the savagery versus civilization theme is heavily underlined by the captivity narrative featuring the ritual sacrifice of the romantic heroine at the ceremony of a 'horrible' religion; here the most evil of all religions: Satanism, in the disguise of a 'civilized' European bourgeoisie.

The Black Cat plays up the perversities of a 'horrible' sexuality adding incestuous implications in Poelzig's two marriages to Werdegast's wife and daughter, both named Karen. There are also hints of sado-masochism in the Poelzig-Karen relation and necrophilia in Poelzig's erotic exhibition of previously sacrificed maidens lying in glass coffins in his mausoleum. This time Karloff's combination of the depravity of his character (with distinct British manners and accent) is set up as a contrast to the American couple who from the start are defined as the romantic heroes of the plot, making the Karloff character 'foreign', or more precisely 'European'. The character's last name, 'Poelzig', is undoubtedly taken from one of Edgar G Ulmer's mentors, German set designer Hans Poelzig (*The Golem*, et al) at Ufa, but his Christian name, Hjalmar, is allegedly taken from Henrik Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* (*Vildanden*, 1884), which Ulmer is supposed to have admired though I have not read anything to support this thesis (another one is that it might be inspired by the Swedish novelist Hjalmar Bergman, who was in Hollywood during the mid-twenties when Ulmer visited for the first time—they might have known each other then). However, as always, the simplest of solutions is the most probableæthe name just sounded 'foreign' enough.

Complications and confusions in the plot are mainly centered on the character of Dr Vitus Werdegast. In the final version of the film he is a kind of mediator between the savagery of the Old World and the civilization of the New World. Explaining the background, sharing his insights of the horrors of the frontier and taking actions against the 'savages', he seems to play the role of the 'Man Who Knows Indians' in the horror film tradition of van Helsing, the distinctly British scientist (though of Dutch origin) in *Dracula*. Thus, he combines his scientific knowledge as a psychiatrist with a worldly wisdom of occult matters. Thereby he can finally defeat and kill the evil Poelzig by skinning him alive and, in a self-sacrificial act, blowing up the fort after instructing the young couple to escape.

However, the Werdegast character is treated with ambivalence throughout the film. Played with a thick Hungarian accent by Bela Lugosi, he never lets the audience forget his European cultural identity and the iconographic association with his role in *Dracula*. Probably everyone in the cinema theatre expected him to reveal his 'monstrousness' at any time during the film. Already in the beginning of the film he seems to prey upon the young American couple with a surpressed lust for Joan in the train compartment. He then 'accidentally' takes them to Poelzig's house of horrors, where heæliterally in a chess gameægambles with their lives in order to get at his arch enemy. In the climax scene this latent 'monstruousness' is finally revealed as he 'goes savage' in his madness, skinning his enemy alive in a scene that clearly refers to the archetypal American frontier myths.

In the original shooting script and film version, Werdegast's character is much more sinister, which probably accounts for the strangeness of his behaviour and the sometimes confused plot twists. There he competed with Poelzig for the rights to ravish Joan's body. Her salvation from the Satanist ritual is only staged in order to rape her himself, and in the climax scene he would turn from his torture of Poelzig to threaten Joan before being shot by Peter.

This was altered by some reshooting before release, making Werdegast a 'good guy' by eliminating his evil doings and inventing rationales (though admittedly strained ones) for his actions: 1. A scene were he tells Thamal to wait before taking revenge since "other lives are involved". 2. Werdegast declaring that he intends to let Joan go if he wins the chess game. 3. Although it still seems as though he is menacing Joan in the climax scene and is shot by Peter, this is explained away as a misunderstanding by himself as well as by Joan.

Even in its final shape the film could easily be read as an allegory of a civilized, innocent and virtuous America in the clutches of a savage, depraved and decadent Europe. Witness the rivalry between the Karloff and Lugosi characters with their different European ethnic connotations representing the endless conflictsænational, ethnic, social etcæthat haunted the Old World. Metaphorically, this is heightened in the chess game played by the European arch enemies for Joan's life. The dialogue scene where Peter explains his lack of understanding of the game, preferring the more simple American card game of poker, can be read as an expression of the confu-

sion and the lack of interest felt in the United States towards the European war 'games', where so many young men lost their lives in World War I in spite of the fact that America had no part in originating the conflicts.

Ideological threats are not mentioned, but are evoked in the moral, religious and sexual perversity of the Karloff and Lugosi characters, ultimately threatening the very foundations of the American culture: the family. Only by escaping the destruction of the conflict, as the whole battlefield explodes and kills everyone present, can the American couple survive. If there ever was a horror film playing on the popular strings of American isolationism, this is it.