THE MUMMY'S POOL

Bruce Kawin

Helen: Have I been asleep? I had—strange dreams. Dreams of ancient Egypt, I think. There was someone like you in them.

Ardeth Bey: My pool is sometimes troubled. One sees strange fantasies in the water. But they pass, like dreams.

—The Mummy

Sir John Talbot: All astronomers are amateurs. When it comes to the heavens, there's only one professional.

—The Wolf Man

Karl Freund's The Mummy (1932), George Wagner's The Wolf Man (1941), Reginald LeBorg's The Mummy's Ghost (1944), and Peter Weir's The Last Wave (1978) each point to some very interesting connections among horror films, nightmares, and prophetic dreams—connections that might help explain what horror films do and why they remain interesting to viewers who probably stopped believing in Dracula along with Santa Claus. To clarify some of these points—such as the relations between displacement and reflexivity, prophecy and the attractions of being the "first victim," catharsis and the Land of the Dead, reincarnation and repression—it is necessary to define the elementary ways in which films are like dreams and the broad characteristics of horror film as a genre.

Watching a film and having a dream are both passive and active events. The dreamer/audience is physically cushioned in a darkened room, most of his movements restricted to slight shifts of position in a bed or chair, and mentally in various degrees of alertness, watching a visual process that often tells a story and often masks/presents some type of thought. In both cases the eyes move and the mind exercises creative attention. The dreamer might be considered more creative since the dream manifests his own thought processes, but the role of the film audience is also an active one since the viewer creates his own experience of the work: we all have different interpretations of Persona not because the film is difficult, but because we interact with the signs in the generation of meaning and be-
cause our attention is selective. Although the dreamer is completely responsible for the dream, he usually avoids this awareness and casts himself in the role of participant or spectator; although the filmmakers are responsible for the movie, the viewer decides which film to attend and so chooses the general content of his experience. Thus dreamer and filmgoer approach a middle ground of pseudo-responsibility for what is watched. Both dreams and films include oral and visual information but are effectively dominated by the limits of pictorialization. Film is primarily a visual medium, and the stories and symbols in dreams are subject not only to condensation, displacement, and secondary revision, but also to translation into pictorial and concrete representability, according to Freud (1931). In *Mindscreen* (Kawin, 1978) I have attempted to show how the visual fields of film and dream are analogous, particularly in the ways each field indicates the "offscreen" activity of a consciousness. In a film this "narrating" mind may be that of the artist, of a character within the fiction, or of the work's self-awareness; "mindscreen" generally refers to the visual and sometimes aural field of such a consciousness, as opposed for instance to "subjective camera," which imitates the visual field of the physical eye of a character. A dream is the mindscreen of its dreamer, as the color section of *The Wizard of Oz* is the mindscreen of Dorothy and as *Persona* is the mindscreen of its own systemic self-consciousness. A film like Wise's *The Curse of the Cat People* plays with the question of whether the ghost is "real" or an aspect of the mindscreen of the child.

One goes to a horror film in order to have a nightmare—not simply a frightening dream, but a dream whose undercurrent of anxiety both presents and masks the desire to fulfill and be punished for certain conventionally unacceptable impulses. This may be a matter of unconscious wish-fulfillment, following Freud; of confronting a hidden evil in the culture, as in *Alien* or *The Stepford Wives*; or of voyaging through the Land of the Dead and indulging a nostalgia for ritual, as we shall see when we turn to Frazer. Horror films function as nightmares for the individual viewer, as diagnostic eruptions for repressive societies, and as exorcistic or transcendent pagan rituals for supposedly post-pagan cultures. They can be analyzed in all these ways because they represent a unique juncture of personal, social, and mythic structure and because each of these structures has a conscious/official and an unconscious/repressed dualism, whose dialectic finds expression in the act of masking.

The clearest way to define the horror film genre is to compare it with that of science fiction, since the two are regularly confused with each other and often draw on the same materials (*Alien*, for instance, is a monster movie set in outer space). In what may seem like an unnecessarily long digression, I would like to show how horror and science fiction tend to present radically opposite interpretations of what may look like comparable situations, because the closed-system world view of horror may be a key to its personal and societal dreamwork.

Genres are determined not by plot-elements so much as of attitudes toward plot-elements. Horror and science fiction are different because of their attitudes toward curiosity and the openness of systems, and comparable in that both tend to organize themselves around some confrontation between an unknown and a would-be knower. To lay to rest the usual assumption that a film is science fiction if it has scientists in it and horror if it has monsters, let us look quickly at a science fiction film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and a horror film, *The Thing*, both of which are 1951 Cold War American studio films about flying saucers with highly intelligent pilots.
The Day the Earth Stood Still (directed by Robert Wise) is the story of a spaceman, Klaatu (Michael Rennie), who sets down his flying saucer in Washington, D.C. with the intention of putting Earth on notice: anything resembling nuclear violence will be punished by the obliteration of the planet, courtesy of a race of interstellar robot police. The spaceman has three forces to contend with: the army, which wants to destroy him; the scientists, who are willing to listen to him; and a woman (Patricia Neal) who understands and helps him. The central scientist (Sam Jaffe) is a kooky but open-minded and serious figure. Although it is suggested that earthlings understand violence better than most kinds of communication, they do respond to a nonviolent demonstration of Klaatu’s power, and he does manage to deliver his message—perhaps at the expense of his life. The film’s bias is in favor of open-minded communication, personal integrity, nonviolence, science, and friendship. The major villain (Hugh Marlowe) is a man who values personal fame and power more than integrity and love; he is willing to turn Klaatu over to the army, which shoots first and asks questions later—even if it means losing Neal, his fiancée.

The Thing from Another World (directed by Christian Nyby with considerable assistance from the producer, Howard Hawks) is deliberately formulaic, and so it is valuable more as a key rather than as a distinguished contribution to the genre. It is the story of a team of military men sent to an Arctic station at the request of its scientists, to investigate what turns out to be the crash of a flying saucer. The saucer’s pilot (James Arness) is a blood-sucking vegetable that is described as intelligent but spends most of its time yelling and killing and leaving evidence of plans for conquest. The minor villain is a scientist (Robert Corthwaite) who wants to communicate with the Thing rather than destroy it and who admires the alien race for its lack of sexual emotion. The Thing, however, has no interest in the scientist; and the human community (from which the scientist wishes to exclude himself), led by an efficient, hard-headed, and sexually active Captain (Kenneth Tobey), manages to electrocute the “super carrot.” The film’s bias is in favor of that friendly, witty, sexy, and professionally effective—Hawksian—human community, and opposed to the dark forces that lurk outside (the Thing as Beowulf’s Grendel). The film also opposes the lack of a balanced professionalism (the scientist who becomes indifferent to the human community and whose professionalism approaches the fanatical, as opposed to the effective Captain and the klutz but less seriously flawed reporter), and what was meant in that paranoid time by the term Communism (we are all one big vegetable or zombie with each cell equally conscious).

This is how the oppositions between these two movies stack up:

1. **Army vs. Scientists.** In both films the army and the scientists are in conflict with each other. The army sees the alien as a threatening invader to be defended against and, if necessary or possible, destroyed. The scientists see the alien as a visitor with superior knowledge, to be learned from and, if possible, joined. In The Thing the army is right and the scientist is an obsessive visionary who gets in the way of what obviously needs to be done. In The Day the scientists are right and the army is an impulsive force that is almost responsible for the end of the world (hardly a far-fetched perspective).

2. **Violence vs. Intelligence.** The Thing is nonverbal and destructive; Klaatu is articulate and would prefer to be nonviolent. The army, which meets violence with
violence, is correct in The Thing and wrong in The Day because of the nature of the alien; but what I am suggesting here is that the alien has its nature because of each genre’s implicit attitude toward the unknown. The curious scientist is a positive force in The Day and a negative force in The Thing, for the same reasons.

3. Closing vs. Opening. Both horror and science fiction open our sense of the possible (mummies can live, men can turn into wolves, Martians can visit) especially in terms of community (the Creature walks among us). Most horror films are oriented toward the restoration of the status quo rather than toward any permanent opening. The Day is about man’s opportunity to join an interstellar political system; it opens the community’s boundaries and leaves them open. The Thing is about the expulsion of an intruder and ends with a warning to “watch the skies” in case more monsters show up; in other words, the community is opened against its will and attempts to reclose. What the horrified community has generally learned from the opening is to be on guard and that chaos can be repressed.

4. Inhuman vs. Human. Science fiction is open to the potential value of the inhuman: one can learn from it, take a trip with it (Close Encounters), include it in a larger sense of what is. Horror is fascinated by transmutations between human and inhuman (wolfmen, etc.), but the inhuman characteristics decisively mandate destruction. This can be rephrased as Uncivilized vs. Civilized or as Id vs. Superego, suggesting the way a horror film allows forbidden desire to find masked expression before it is destroyed by more decisive repression. The Id attempts to include itself in the wholeness of the dream-picture but is perceived as a threat and expelled from the community of what is human.

It is not too heavy a borrowing from The Republic to observe that the Gestalts of an artwork, a person, and a society are comparable. The Wolf Man expresses and exorcises the Id-force of uncontrolled aggression in its own system (the werewolf), in Larry Talbot’s (his werewolf phases), and in the community (the destabilizing forces of rape, murder, gypsy liminality, and aristocratic privilege—Talbot often behaves as if he had droit du seigneur when courting the engaged Gwen). In The Invasion of the Body Snatchers the egoless emotionless attitude of the “pods” is as undesirable as in Becky by it as it is in the culture.

5. Communication vs. Silence. This links most of the above. The Thing doesn’t talk; Klaatu does. (Or: Romero’s Living Dead are completely nonverbal, while the climax of Close Encounters is an exchange of languages.) What one can talk with, one can generally deal with. Communication is vital in The Day, absurd in The Thing. The opened community can be curious about and learn from the outsiders, while the closed community talks only among itself. Horror emphasizes the dread of knowing, the danger of curiosity, while science fiction emphasizes the danger and irresponsibility of the closed mind. Science fiction appeals to consciousness, horror to the unconscious.

In Gestalt terms, any dream (or fantasy or artwork) involves the projection of aspects of the self and the arrangement or interplay of those projections in a structure that corresponds to the whole self; the therapist’s task is to help the dreamer re-own the projections. If I dream that I am walking in the desert and see a flower, a therapist might have me speak in the voice of the flower and then in the voice of the desert, to help me realize that they are as much myself as that image of the wandering observer and that the whole scene is a display of my wholeness. In this sense
the science fiction Gestalt features a split-off creative hope that, once re-owned, can lead to an open, growthful, positive system. The horror Gestalt features a split-off destructive element that will be feared until it is re-owned, at which point the system can become stable. In most horror films, however, the negative projection is not re-owned but rejected and repressed: the Blob is frozen but can never be killed, the Mummy is burned but reappears in sequel, and in Alien the monster is destroyed but the corporate evil survives. Repression solves nothing, but (coupled with the momentary wish-fulfillment) gives a temporary sense of relief. Henry Frankenstein (leaving the novel out of this) may attempt to reverse the Original Sin and re-enter the community by acquiescing to the horror cliche that “there are things we are not meant to know”—except that his initial hubristic motive was not just to figure out eternity but to create life without the help of any Eve (he wants to “be as God” in a double sense) and when in the sequel he manages to get married it is a sure bet that some Dr. Praetorius will “force” him into an all-male effort to create a bride for the monster, Henry’s split-off rejected/rejecting child-self.

In the dreamworld of movies, horror films come under two headings: in the Freudian sense, they are anxiety dreams or nightmares; anthropologically they express a nostalgia for contact with the spirit world. In his Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1938), Freud observed that “the attitude of the dreamer towards his wishes is a peculiar one: he rejects them, censors them, in short, he will have none of them. Their fulfillment, then, can afford him no pleasure, rather the opposite, and here experience shows that this ‘opposite,’ which has still to be explained, takes the form of anxiety” (p. 520n).

In The Wolf Man this process is extremely clear. Larry Talbot (Lon Chaney Jr.) is a big Americanized engineer who is being groomed by his short and controlling father, Sir John (Claude Rains) to take over Talbot castle and the role of village Baron. Larry meets Gwen (Evelyn Ankers) and comes on like a “wolf,” despite her being engaged to his father’s gamekeeper (a model of controlled animal aggression, who is suited for the civilized institution of marriage). After he is bitten by a gypsy werewolf (Bela Lugosi) Larry splits into a wolf and a man. The man experiences pain and anxiety at the prospect of acting out his unconscious desires; at the climax the wolf begins to attack Gwen and then abandons her for more pressing game, Sir John. Larry insures he will be punished for this, for although he has given Gwen his own protective medallion, he has given his father the silver-headed wolf cane that can kill him. The Wolf Man is a transparently Oedipal nightmare, a full playing out of castration anxiety, and a clear example of how some horror films are analogous to one kind of dream. Although it can be said that The Wolf Man is the dream of the screenwriter (Curt Siodmak, who went on to dream the similar Bride of the Gorilla), it could also be analyzed as Larry’s dramatized dreamworld—or, taking a cue from Beauty and the Beast, as Gwen’s projection of the two sides of her sexuality, werewolf and gamekeeper; but it is also obviously the dream of the audience, which has decided to let its own unconscious desires find as-if expression, with the scariness of the film carrying the dream’s anxiety quotient and the killing of the beast appearing to vindicate repression.

There is yet another side to all this. Sir John (a prize-winning researcher) believes in God, the universal “professional”; his religious sense is conventionally patriarchal, and Larry’s Oedipal rebellion includes his participation in an erupting/repressed religion, gypsy superstition. (Recall the scene where Larry is too upset to join his father in church.) Whereas Sir John believes that all this is in Larry’s mind and that werewolfery can be explained as a split between “the good and evil in a
man's soul,” with the evil finding expression in a fantasy of animality, the film attempts to prove him wrong. Sir John finds that all this is not a dream, that the wolf he has killed is his son. In this sense the horror film asserts the survival of “paganism” (the gypsies are right) and the inadequacy of science (“all astronomers are amateurs,” a theme recognizable in The Thing) — a return to magic. Judaeo-Christianity represses, in this sense, the mystical unconscious that the horror-system allows to be expressed. (All this opens the possibility of a Jungian reading as well.) We may recall Van Helsing's pronouncement in Dracula that, "the strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him."

In The Golden Bough Frazer (1963) observed that dreams are often considered instances of contact with the spirits of the dead and that such dreams may serve as keys to the future and (through the symbolism of mistletoe, placed under pillows to induce prophetic dreams and, as “the golden bough,” an illuminating opensesame) to the Underworld. Freud (1938) too mentions the ancient concept of “true and valuable dreams which were sent to the dreamer as warnings, or to foretell future events (p. 184).” and there is a considerable surviving literature of dreaming as genuine out-of-body travel, usually on the astral plane.* A medieval poem like Pearl (in which the poet mourns the death of his daughter and then has a dream of her full-grown in heaven) can be Electra-cut by any number of Freudian readings, but its appeal and point are clearly in the way it presents itself as a genuine visionary experience.

Horror films appeal to this kind of dreaming through the figures of seer and “first victim,” and thus to the audience's desire to glimpse the truth, no matter how horrible. (A Freudian might translate this into the desire to learn about sex and be punished for it, which is often a legitimate reading.) In science fiction the visionary is usually rewarded, in horror, punished. Peter Weir's The Last Wave (one of the few great horror films of the decade, perhaps matched only by Spirit of the Beehive and Don't Look Now) is the story of an Australian lawyer named David (Richard Chamberlain) who defends a group of aborigines involved in a ritual murder, one of whom (Gulpilil) begins to appear in his dreams. These dreams put him in touch with a parallel world (“the other side,” in Western terminology) and remind him of his childhood experiences of night travel and prophetic dreaming. Eventually David discovers that he is a member of a race of priests and that the aborigines have summoned up a great wave to destroy the intruding white civilization. As soon as he accepts his true vocation, David sees the wave and becomes its first victim. The wish such a horror film fulfills is that of seeing, and the world view it confirms is that “the other side” is real. In other words, David is a surrogate for the audience’s desire to have, through watching a horror film, a spiritual vision. The satisfaction of being “first victim” is that one knows the hidden truth.

In the greatest of all horror films, Dreyer's Vampyr, the world and “the other side” continuously overlap, and a dream within this dreamworld reveals to the hero the identity of the vampire. It is within this dream—of nearly being buried in a coffin whose window is clearly a reference to the frame of the movie-screen, so that the audience is cast as the victim/dreamer of the film-as-horror-object—that the hero is most in danger. The survival of Dreyer's dreamer and the death of Weir's visionary show that the crucial issue is not the destruction of the seer, but the threat of victimization. They also show that, although more common impulse in the horror film is to exorcise the demon and save the community (Vampyr, Jaws, The Thing, Tarantula, The Blob, Frankenstein, etc.), there is a parallel track in which the community is rightfully destroyed (The Last Wave, Dawn of the Dead, Dr. Strangelove).
"The other side" may be a parallel spirit-world or it may be the Underworld, the Land of the Dead: in horror films these are usually comparable. At the climax of The Last Wave, David finds that he is a reincarnated priest, in a sense his own ghost. In Apocalypse Now (which advertises its indebtedness to The Golden Bough) the possibility of the community’s being restored by the exorcism of Kurtz is overwhelmingly ironic, since the truths of the Underworld have more integrity than the lies of the conscious Establishment and the transfigured seer can never rejoin “their fucking army.” So although there are many horror films that play on the dangerous attractions of prophecy and spirit-contact, the cathartic journey into the Land of the Dead presents itself as the larger category and as the key to all the patterns observed so far, especially if one makes the link between death and the rigidity of unconscious fixations. Freud’s work on the relations between compulsive repetition and the death instinct (Beyond the Pleasure Principle) is very useful here, but the more luminous juncture is that between the Mummy films and The Golden Bough.

The Mummy opens with the best “first victim” scene I know of. An expedition has discovered a mummy, Imhotep (Boris Karloff), and with him a sealed casket bearing a formidable curse. While two senior Egyptologists (one a straight scientist, one superstitious) discuss whether to open the box, the junior researcher, left alone, opens it and finds the Scroll of Thoth. Mouthing an impromptu translation under his breath, he inadvertently raises the Mummy from the dead. Imhotep takes the scroll and exits, leaving a terminal madman in his wake. Here the desire to discover what is forbidden is related to the thrills of danger and self-destruction that are part of the cathartic masochism of attending horror films and having nightmares; and the mechanism of releasing an unconscious deathless force is tied into the legend of Isis and Osiris.

According to Frazer (1963), the spell of Thoth was first used by Isis to raise her son Horus from the dead. When her brother/husband Osiris was murdered and dismembered, Isis had the aid of several gods and relatives in reassembling the body-parts (except for his genitals) and raising him from the dead. Revived, Osiris became the King of the Underworld, Lord of Eternity, and Ruler of the Dead. The rituals Isis practiced were imitated in Egyptian burial ceremonies so that the deceased might be born again in the Underworld (although Osiris, the first mummy, was supposed to have been revived in this world too) (Frazer, 1963, 422-26). In Freud’s film, this is condensed into Isis’ using the Scroll of Thoth to revive Osiris from the dead. The story is that Imhotep had tried to read the scroll over the body of his beloved Anckesenamon, a priestess of Isis and daughter of the Pharaoh; for this attempted sacrilege, Imhotep had been buried alive along with the scroll, which could thus never again be used. Revived and in possession of the scroll, however, Imhotep (now calling himself Ardeth Bey) sets out to find the reincarnation of Anckesenamon, who turns out to be Helen Grosvenor (Zita Johann). He nearly convinces her to die and be reborn as a living mummy like himself, but at the last moment Helen decides to live rather than to let her ancient identity dominate her (i.e., she chooses health over neurosis) and appeals to Isis to teach her again the spells she has forgotten over the ages. The statue of Isis responds to the spells and kills the Mummy;—this implies it was not enough for Helen simply to reject Imhotep, that she had to integrate her Helen and her Anckesenamon aspects in order to come into her full power. This is very similar to what Imhotep wanted her to do, except that he would have had her proceed from that integration to a fuller Anckesenamon rather than to a fuller Helen. What this shows is that there is no safety in ignoring the Id/Underworld/monster (the attitude of the ineffectual patsy
in most horror films, e.g., the mayor in Jaws and Helen's modern boyfriend [David Manners] in The Mummy] but that there is considerable strength in confronting the danger and surviving that deeply acknowledged contact—in other words, re-owning the projection. In this sense horror films are valuable and cathartic, for they may offer the possibility of participating in the acting-out of an unacknowledged wish or fear in a context of resolution rather than of repression. This is of course what happens to Helen and not to the Mummy. He is a walking repetition compulsion, determined to complete his frustrated sacreligious and consummate his romance (the sexist aspects of all this are quite blatant in the film). He would have her "go through moments of horror for an eternity of love," but what he means by love is the insatiability of unconscious drives (which are, to be fair, often involved in fantasies of eternal romance). There is value, then, not in being Imhotep but in, like Helen and like the audience, almost being Imhotep.

We are now back to Osiris and Frazer. One of the major points of The Golden Bough is that the agricultural year and the sacred year are closely related in a great many cultures, and that the myth of the death and resurrection of Osiris (like that of Jesus, whose death and resurrection occur in the spring) may have served the Egyptians as an explanation or prompter (through ritual re-enactment) of the land's return to life in the spring after its death in the winter. The parallel with horror films should be immediately obvious: one enters the Land of the Dead, gives death temporary dominion, in order to emerge reborn and refreshed. Horror films are the Land of the Dead, the visionary/ghost-world where shades and demons have power; one goes to the theatre as to the Underworld, becomes Imhotep or Helen on an as-if basis, undergoes a catharsis, and steps back into the light of day (if it happens to be a matinee, which is how most children see horror films and form lasting impressions of the paradigmatic content of the experience). For Osiris, this transit left him in a position of power over the Underworld, and it will be remembered that Jesus too harrowed Hell when he died; thus for the community, the benefits include an assured sense of the existence of divinity and a reborn economy, and for the god, the benefits include life and power. But not all dreams, not all winters, and not all horror films have such happy resolutions. The stories of Osiris and Jesus do not depend on repression. A Freudian dream solves little or nothing until it is understood in analysis; simply to allow the unconscious wish to find masked fulfillment does not remodel the psyche. Left to his own devices, the Mummy will simply repeat his compulsive and insatiable project in sequel after sequel, like an incarnation of neurosis itself. So it is valuable to have a character within the film who can, like Helen, acknowledge the unconscious drive and go on from there into an integrated life—or a dreamer who can re-own projections and live a free, healthy, flexible future.

This reduces itself to a question of audience intention, since even a film like The Thing or The Wolf Man in which the horror-object is simply repressed/killed and the community reasserts its boundaries can serve its audience as a visit to the Land of the Dead. The overall structure of such a visit may be cathartic in the same way that to dream may promote psychic health regardless of dream content. One could, in any case, go to The Wolf Man because one would enjoy participating in a fantasy of uncontrolled aggression and victimization (which is why most people went to Jaws and Alien and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre). But once there, one has the option of feeling that one's private beast has been purged and will require no further playground, or of enjoying the punishment and anxiety that attend unconscious wish-fulfillment and planning to attend another horror film the next time one feels
in conflict about such desires. The latter is clearly more in line with Freud's reading of dreamwork, and with my outline of closed-system behavior, and it is doubtless the more common experience of horror films. Yet the former response is possible and legitimate, and it strikes me as being encouraged in those films that call the viewer's attention to the fact that he is watching a horror film and pretending to believe it, much as the analyst may attempt to engage the patient's ego while interpreting a dream. This is the method of Vampyr and of the bizarre, neglected, wonderful Mummy's Ghost.

The intervening sequels—The Mummy's Hand (1940) and The Mummy's Tomb (1942)—changed many of the terms of the story. The Mummy, Kharis, is now presented as having tried to raise the Princess Ananka by giving her the fluid from nine tana leaves; his tongue is torn out (Kharis is silent, unlike Ardeth Bey), and he is buried with a box of the leaves and charged with guarding her tomb for eternity. The Banning expedition discovers Ananka and ships her mummy back to the Scripps Museum in America, despite considerable interference from Kharis, who has been revived by a cult of priests (led by George Zucco). Kharis' motives are to keep the dead Ananka with him (neurotic possessiveness) and to defend the integrity of the Ancient Gods (against whom he rebelled in the first place). Therefore in these two films he is fulfilling the curse made against himself and has no strategy for reviving Ananka. The climax of these films comes when the priest (George Zucco in Hand, Turhan Bey in Tomb) decides to administer tana fluid to himself and the nearest heroine (who is never Ananka), but is foiled or killed, after which the Mummy is burned and the community of Americans restored. So if Kharis represents anything here, it is the deathless persistence of compulsive fixation that may have begun in sexual desire but has become only an undead, rigid, destructive, rejecting anger.

The Mummy's Ghost may be a brilliant parody of the series, a self-deconstructing masterpiece, or simply what used to be called a really good bad movie. It exploits every formula it can, turning them against themselves, right up to the climax where the monster, for once, gets the girl. It begins in the tombs of Arkham (a reference to Lovecraft?), where Zucco explains his role to the new priest, Yusef Bey (John Carradine). When told of his mission, Yusef Bey says incredulously, "Kharis—still lives?" His "you've got to be putting me on" tone puts the film in sync with the audience immediately, as the sequel declares its awareness of being a formulaic sequel or its worldly equivalent. Next we see Professor Norman explaining to his college students the legend of Kharis, who was supposedly destroyed in their own town, Mapleton. A student argues that, "Maybe it was a man made up as a mummy, to keep the legend alive." The student is of course right in a way he could not guess but the audience can. The professor, however, insists that he saw the monster (i.e., this is a horror-film-like world and these dangers are real). This scientist is of course the first victim.

The romantic lead, Tom Harvey (Robert Lowery), has a crush on an Egyptian, Amina Monzouri (Ramsay Ames) who is working on the college staff; he also has a little dog named Peanuts. Whenever Amina thinks of Egypt, she gets a chill, but Tom insists that Egypt is just like any other modern country. Tom is the all-time ineffectual patsy of the formula, blindly confident in the status quo of modern America and uncomplicated marriage, while Amina is in conflict about her destiny, which is called Egypt but means sex and death—"forbidden love." When Kharis is on his way to kill Professor Norman, his shadow crosses her sleeping face and Amina walks in a trance to the site of the murder. When she is found in the morning, her

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wrist bears the birthmark of Ananka and her hair has a white streak. The next
evening, Tom manages to convince Amina to neck with him in his car; while they
kiss, Kharis’ shadow crosses her face again.

By this time Yusef Bey has brought Kharis to the museum. Downstairs a guard
prepares to relax, hanging his hat on a realistic statue of a woman (i.e., he doesn’t
believe art is real), opening a crime magazine, and turning on the radio (“This is
The Hour of Death. The forces of evil stand at the threshold. A man shall die to-
night. . . . Did you ever meet a killer, my friend? You will tonight—”). The guard is a
surrogate for the horror audience, who enjoys pretending that horrors exist, and a
play on and against the suspension of disbelief—because the lies on the radio
describe the truth of his situation. The reflexivity of this picture allows it to disarm
the audience completely, since it continually calls attention to the fact that it is just a
ghost story and just as continually presents its horrors as real anyway.

Upstairs Kharis finally touches the mummy of Ananka; there is a straight cut to
Amina in bed, waking and screaming; straight cut back to a collapsed pile of
wrappings. Ananka’s soul has been reborn in Amina, again to seek its salvation.
(This would frustrate the curse—for in this version of the story, Ananka and Kharis
are equally culpable for their forbidden love, and the priests’ motives include
keeping either of them from working out their karma through reincarnation.) The
site of Amina’s joining her repressed Ananka is, as usual, implicitly sexual. A friend
reassures her that she “must have been having a nightmare.” Back at the museum,
Kharis kills the guard (“gunshots—crash—” the radio had said; the guard shoots
Kharis and then is smashed against a glass door before being strangled).

Kharis finds Amina in bed and takes her away, unconscious, to a shack where
Yusef Bey waits. Yusef Bey soon tells her that she is Ananka, and points to Kharis
as an example of eternal unfulfillment and restlessness; she faints, and in her sleep
her hair turns completely white. Then Yusef Bey decides to give her and himself
the tana fluid—the most blatant instance of formula (or compulsive role-playing) in
the whole film, coming absolutely out of nowhere—and Kharis kills him. Peanuts
has led Tom to the scene, and Kharis knocks him out; then he carries Amina into
the swamp (in New England?—again, more formula than “reality”). Tom is joined
by the sheriff’s posse (which has been digging a pit for the Mummy and burning
tana leaves—another fakeout, since the Mummy transcends his compulsive desire
for the fluid and walks on with his romantic burden: i.e., the fixed pattern of his
sexual desire is stronger than the fixed pattern of the movie’s formula; this pit
business would have served as a typical solution in many films of the period). A
formulaic rush to the rescue ensues—reminiscent of the torchlight parades in
Frankenstein and The Mummy’s Tomb—with Peanuts and Tom and the posse all
chasing the Mummy. Such crosscut chase scenes have signified climax and
resolution since before Griffith (Hepworth’s Rescued by Rover is perhaps the
earliest example), and aside from the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre sequence of
Intolerance there are very few examples of failed climactic chases in the whole
history of film. One of the most troubling closes The Mummy’s Ghost.

Because the chase does fail, and in a masterful way, as Kharis carries her, Amina
becomes entirely Ananka: her flesh dries, her frame contracts, but she is still alive.
Imhotep’s project has been fulfilled (Kharis too has returned to his origins): the two
lovers are united as living mummies. This rare moment of absolute fulfillment of
forbidden love, which Amina has been shrinking from and growing toward and
which Kharis has been yearning after for 3000 years, is immediately succeeded by
their deaths—they drown in the swamp. The posse stands there looking beaten,
Tom (who has seen Ananka’s face) is a wreck, Peanuts is alone on the swampbank
cocking his puzzled head. There is a sudden feeling of “what happened!” Suddenly a real horror has asserted itself—Amina has given herself over to her unconscious drives; the Mummy has abducted her and gotten away with it; all the formulas have failed at once. And at this point a George Zucco voice-over intones the curse: “The fate of those who defy the will of the Ancient Gods will be a cruel and violent death.” (This is what Derrida would recognize as a good place to begin deconstructing the film, except that the film has already done it for us.) Although it seems that Ananka has repeated her sin rather than sought her salvation, and therefore is properly punished (Freud again), there is no denying the satisfactions of romantic apotheosis. Except if one views it from a feminist perspective, whereby Amina could be seen as surrendering to the deadly obsessions of her abductor, utterly identifying with her state of victimization; the horror of her no-win situation is that her only alternative to Khari, in this culture, would be to play the role of Tom's wife. Whether Amina is seen as joining her demon lover or as the victim of a cosmic rape, it is still clear that the curse, as formulated, is not in control, and that horror has triumphed.

Behaving according to formula is one aspect of repetition compulsion and of neurosis. In this film the force of Khari and Ananka's unconscious desires is so strong that they at least balance and perhaps make irrelevant the repressive curse. (To say that Amina has these “desires” is to say that she behaves like a Freudian construct of masochistic femininity; if one abandons the feminist reading, one is left with the less complex observation that she allows the aspects of her sexuality that frighten her to find complete expression.) Khari is so compulsive that he wins, even if briefly, and the formulaic aspects of the genre are turned against themselves; the community is not restored. The audience is unable to take comfort from the expected formulaic resolution and has been made aware of the presence of formula all along: so the possibility exists that this film educates its audience (engages the ego in self-consciousness) rather than encouraging it only to participate in unconscious wish fulfillment (while, as usual, having it both ways and fulfilling the wish completely). As it reminds the audience that it is a formulaic film, The Mummy's Ghost is like a dream, one of whose major strategies has been undermined—since one of the basic functions of displacement and secondary revision is not just to mask the desire but to keep the dreamer asleep, to keep the dreamer from realizing what these masked desires are, and that they are his own. Like the most intense nightmares, The Mummy's Ghost awakens the audience in a moment of anxious clarity and fulfillment. It may be, to reverse the phrase, that the sleep of monsters breeds reason.

REFERENCE NOTE


REFERENCES