DEAD OF NIGHT (CAVALCANTI 1945)

Ealing Studio played a central role in the development of the British film industry before and after World War II. It drew its actors from the London stage and connected to audiences with a middle-class populism that combined comedy with political acumen. Most famous for its films of the 50s (Kind Hearts and Coronets, 1949; Passport to Pimlico, 1949; The Lavender Hill Mob, 1951; The Ladykillers, 1955), Dead of Night (1945) celebrated the end of the war with a portmanteau project that offered four of its directors the opportunity to construct independent narratives combined into a single spooky tale about a recurrent nightmare of an architect who visits a country house.

Arturo Cavalcanti came to Britain from Brazil, where he had begun as a failed law student (he had an argument with a professor) and was sent to Switzerland where he began to study architecture. After a visit back home, Cavalcanti took up a position at the Brazilian consulate in Liverpool, but he continued his interests in the arts, corresponding with Marcel L’Herbier, a promoter of the avant-garde film movement in France. L’Herbier offered Cavalcanti a job as a set designer. He returned to England to work on several projects, and joined Ealing in 1940, where he worked on a number of propaganda films for the war effort. As if to celebrate the end of the war, Ealing enlisted Cavalcanti and three other of its directors (Basil Deardon, Charles Chrichton, and Robert Hamer) to develop a horror film in the form of an anthology.

Guests are in the midst of a “house party” at the rural estate of Eliot Foley. Foley wants to make improvements to his farm and house and has enlisted an architect, Walter Craig, to join them for a few days. Even as he drives up to the house, however, Craig has the feeling that he’s been there before. When he sees the guests, the feeling intensifies, and he tells each of them that they are playing a role in a circular dream that ends in tragedy. One of the guests, Dr. van Straaten, an immigrant psychiatrist (from Holland rather than Vienna, to avoid audience anti-war sentiment), explains Craig’s dream as a psychosis without significance, but the other guests defend Craig by revealing their own experiences with the uncanny. All of the stories involve exchanges between life and death. A race-car drive who barely survives a racing accident is given a premonition of a bus accident and avoids a “second death.” A young girl discovers a ghost at a children’s Twelfth Night celebration in an 18c. manor house. A Chippendale mirror continues to reflect the bedroom in which its former owner had strangled his wife out of jealousy. A cheated golfer commits suicide but haunts the victor in a comic-relief tale that allows the audience to prepare for the longest story, the psychiatrists own, about a ventriloquist whose dummy gains the upper hand. Omens along the way lead the audience to the climax of the film, where Craig confronts van Straaten literally and the film “recycles” again to its innocent beginning.

The Master Trope: the Story in the Story

In the story in the story, the audience forgets where it is; it is hypnotized by this simple act by which the initial entry into the fictive world encounters another entry into another fictive world: < ... <. This is the interval used by hypnotists; when you are preparing to be hypnotized (or preparing to resist hypnotism) you are already hypnotized. Your “first encounter” is really your second, and the equalization of the first and second entry point allows for the ambiguity of the interval you occupy. A “square-wave condition” develops, which is anamorphosis at its purest. Between the levels of φ and -φ, the audience allows for the detachment of virtual spaces and creation of “poché spaces” into which anything may disappear and reappear. In this liberated space-time, the audience advances from anxiety (Angst) to fear (Furcht) to fright (Schreck) — the ideal route carefully constructed by any director wishing to be a “master of suspense.” The key is the psychiatrist, Dr. van Straaten. Thanks to his resistance to the belief in the supernatural, the audience abandons the function of belief altogether. Siding with van Straaten’s realist criteria, they readily accept the evidence presented by the supporters who have, as “eye witnesses,” been forced to admit the multiple folds of reality. This literary form, known as the “Gingrich tale,” is like the magic performer who relies on the audience’s skepticism rather than its belief in magic. Without skepticism, the transition from anxiety to fear to fright cannot occur. This film shows how!
The omen predicts a future and in a real sense is a "pre-effect" of something yet to happen. This premature temporal location turns the predicate of the effect around, making it "turn" in a causal direction; in this reversed position, it is one of many causes of a single effect (cf. the usual relation of one cause to many effects). The cause-effect reversal simultaneously reverses the temporal arrow.

cause 1 effect 2
< ... <
the omen as a cause with the "wrong effect"

The mirror usually just reflects the space in front of it, but in this sequence the mirror "remembers" a past scene, which it reproduces while at the same time it interpolates the modern user so that he becomes "predicated" by his own mirror. Reversed predication is equivalent to cross-inscription: the past with its future-durable mirror is symmetrical with the future and its mirror stuck in the past.

The ventriloquist’s dummy is the servant/automaton that entertains by seeming to be autonomous. The joke turns serious when the ventriloquist’s mind of subject to schizophrenia, and the voice created as an ideal ego becomes the ego–ideal. The dummy is material with a small element of life (D), while the ventriloquist is almost normal, but with a small element of the "dead thing" inside, drawing him toward death (A).

\[ \text{cause 1 effect 2} < \ldots < \text{the normal reflective function is reversed} \]
\[ < \leftrightarrow > \]
\[ \text{the servant becomes the master, ambiguously} \]

Presented with an image of impending doom, subjectivity has a choice. "Will I escape this predicted death, or will I in fact not do precisely those things that will guarantee my ‘appointment in Samarra’?" The race-car driver sees a hearse from his hospital window and recognizes the driver as a bus conductor. The double sign persuades him not to take the bus, which crashes just after its stop. Yet, the problem of to follow or escape the prediction persists with Craig’s observation that every realization of his dream further obliges him to live it out. This "double lock" enlists the audience’s sympathy for Craig over van Straaten, and we realize that the doctor's realism was there to pull us in that direction. All along, we have been pulling for Craig because van Straaten’s explanations were simply not interesting enough. We were compelled by our own curiosity to go from anxiety to fear to fright; our own "death" (confrontation with the unpleasant ending of the film) was self-driven and self-engineered by interpreting omens as "inevitable."

FROM THE BORROMEO KNOT TO BLOOM’S REVISIONARY RATIOS

Lacan’s system is notably divided into three main parts: the imaginary (where the subject encounter its own mirror image as an "ideal ego" that casts its own bodily reality into abjection); the symbolic (networks of symbolic relationships, where the subject is interred by an "inner voice" of consciousness that regulates its behavior); and the Real, taken over by the super-ego function derived from the child’s relation to the mother and father. Because the upshot of the three drives (oral, anal, phallic) is that the subject is left with a reserve of “negative space,” home is ambiguously a place and non-place, dominated by the phallic logic of appearance and disappearance — in short, the uncanny (Unheimlich). Where the imaginary is regulated by the gaze, and the symbolic by the inner voice of the ego-ideal, the traumatic–Real of the super-ego is radically dæmonic. This is an over-presence that collapses the dimensionalities constructed by the subject to accommodate symbolic and imaginary relationships, and the only defense against this collapse is Bloom’s category of askesis: retreat. Yet, this retreat is subject to reversed predication, also known as cross-inscription. The manor house in the 12th Night story is haunted by the ghost of the murdered child (Hc), a version of AD. But the child himself has "forgotten how to die," Da, and the Ci expression is equally valid. The house and boy alternately predicate each other.

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