

Dracula

(Todd Browning, 1931)

Component 1: Key developments in US film

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Contexts of film**

Rationale for study: Browning's *Dracula* was the first serious American horror film ever produced, and a big risk for Universal Studios. Bela Lugosi's performance, along with many other scenes and images from the film, have subsequently become iconic. The huge success of *Dracula* led to a series of movies that featured what became known as the 'Universal Monsters' (*The Wolfman*, *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy* etc.). There have also been numerous remakes and reboots, including the British Hammer Studios franchise. In 2000, *Dracula* was admitted to the US Library of Congress as a film that is "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant".

STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

'Arrival at Castle Dracula' - in: 9:46, out: 15:25

'Van Helsing and the mirror' - in: 42:40, out: 46:08

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Extreme long shots of Castle Dracula's entrance hall enabled us to see the scale of the staircase and its aged and decaying appearance. Cinematographer Karl Freund had previously worked on *Metropolis* (Lang, 1929), which also features sets that suggest vast and intimidating

architecture. You should consider how the interiors of Dr Seward's house in England are shot differently and what effect this has on the atmosphere of these scenes.

- There are a number of striking close-ups of Dracula throughout – his face looms above us and focused lighting makes his eyes seem like pinpoints, increasing his menace.
- There's little camera movement in the film – the two exceptions are when we see Dracula react to Renfield cutting his hand and when Mina is about to bite Jonathan. You should consider the effect of these two tracking shots/zooms, and how they make Dracula/Mina appear intense and otherworldly.

Mise-en-scène

- The Castle Dracula set is both decrepit and imposing – it gives the impression of Dracula as a character with remarkable wealth and power, but also of belonging to a bygone era. By contrast, Dr Seward's house seems comfortably middle-class and 'modern'. The use of props such as electrical lights and a microscope add to this.
- Renfield's costume at the beginning – and most of the English characters – are that of modern, middle-class Western Europeans (and Americans). Renfield's white trilby hat could also symbolise his innocence. By contrast, Dracula's costume suggests European aristocracy from a century or two previous. His black and white evening attire makes him appear wealthy and sophisticated (far from the monster we may have expected) with a medallion that suggests nobility. This links to the major theme of modernity vs ancient history. His iconic black cape also hints at the bat form he can transform into.

Editing

- Most of the editing in the film is quite straightforward match-on-action. In this sequence, the film cuts between medium, long and extreme long shots to show the crumbling grandeur of the castle and the body language and facial expressions of the characters: slightly sinister charm from the Count, increasing unease from Renfield, etc.
- This rhythm is broken a few times when we see a medium close-up of Dracula's next victim (Renfield, Mina, the matchgirl) looking scared/enchanted, then cut to point-of-view shot of Dracula's intense facial expression as he stares menacingly at his victim. Candidates may wish to consider how these shots make them feel the victim's terror and/or Dracula's allure.
- To save money, the film was produced the year after the Wall Street Crash and the start of the Great Depression – many sequences are summarised in dialogue, or with cutaways to newspaper headlines. In addition, the film cuts away from scenes of violence (including any neck-biting and Dracula's demise). This may have been to please censors and out of fear that audiences wouldn't be able to cope with a 'serious' horror film.

Sound

- *Dracula* was a very early sound film, capitalising on the enthusiasm of audiences for this added dimension to the cinema experience. Nonetheless, a silent version was released alongside this version. This was a common practice in the early sound era as not all cinemas had yet installed the technology to play sound.
- The director uses Foley sound effects (created by Charles Foley himself) such as the creaks and groans of the doors and furniture to create a sinister atmosphere. There is also the occasional howl from wolves outside that increase the sense of threat.
- There is no musical score – only some extracts from Classical music in the titles and during the scene at the opera.
- Dracula's dialogue, particularly when spoken by

Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi, shows that he is cultured, suave and charming (not at all like the more animalistic villain of Bram Stoker's novel). His 'foreign' accent also shows his otherness – and became the stereotypical vampire accent referred to endlessly in popular culture. Dracula's line describing the wolves as "children of the night" shows he has a poetic streak. This emphasises his role as a 'Byronic hero'.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Contexts of film

Social/cultural

- *Dracula* may seem tame when compared to more recent horror films, however, in 1931, audiences had never seen anything like it. The German expressionists had made films like *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922), which was a huge influence on the style of *Dracula*. *Dracula* was a big risk as Hollywood studios were known for making comedic, supernatural films at this time and the filmmakers were concerned audiences would be too horrified by what is quite a gruesome story.
- Consider the scenes where Dracula attacks his victims. How does the violence differ from other horror films you have seen? Consider the other gruesome events: the 'death ship' Vesta, Lucy rising from the grave and feeding on children, etc. How are we told about these events without explicitly seeing them? What does this tell you about audiences' values at the time?

Political

- The first 30 years of the 20th century saw the fastest and most significant period of scientific and technological development in human history. One of the reasons Dracula scared audiences at the time was because he represents an ancient, mythological evil that modern rationality and science cannot combat. Consider the characters in the scenes in England – how do they represent the 'modern' world, dismissive of superstition? What about Van Helsing – how does he bridge the worlds of science and mythology?

Institutional

- *Dracula* was the first horror movie with sound. Listen carefully to the soundtrack, perhaps without the visuals. How do the sound effects add to the creepy atmosphere? How do the character's voices – especially that of Bela Lugosi – add to the richness of the story?
- Because *Dracula* was such a risk for Universal (at the time, a very small studio in Hollywood) the budget was much lower than other films. One of the reasons that there is no orchestral score written and performed for the film was that it would be too expensive. Consider how different the film might be with a score.

ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS: Narrative

- Consider the characters in *Dracula*. In what ways do they challenge the traditional hero/protagonist, villain/antagonist, donor, helper, etc.?
- The Byronic hero: this is an archetype first seen in 18th-19th century Gothic fiction and is named after the poet Lord Byron. The Byronic hero has many qualities of the villain (ruthless, dangerous, sinister, amoral) but also of the hero (noble, handsome, charming, seductive, melancholic). Look at the tag line for the above poster – how does it emphasise a romantic element? Consider Bela Lugosi's performance in this film version (and the way other characters fall under his spell). How does he fulfil the character type of the Byronic hero?
- Consider the narrative structure of *Dracula*. In what ways does it follow and challenge established structures, such as Todorov's five stages (orientation, disruption, recognition, resolution and return)? Who's



‘normal’ world is established at the start of the film? How is it disrupted and what is the disruption? Is Dracula the ‘disruption’ or is Dracula the hero, and Van Helsing is the disruption to his story?

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

‘Arrival at Castle Dracula’ – in: 9:46, out: 15:25

- Low angle shots of Dracula on the staircase make him appear powerful, like he is looming over us. Medium shot distance enables us to appreciate his upright, aristocratic posture and costume.
- High angle shots of Renfield make him appear weaker; medium-long shot distance enable us to see his flailing arms and confused facial expression, making him appear even more vulnerable.
- The scale of the staircase makes Renfield appear small and insignificant – though Dracula is the same size, his position on the stairs, the spotlight (moon beam) and his position in the centre of the screen emphasise his powerful presence.
- The gigantic spiderwebs and the shadows from the windows create the sense that Renfield is trapped. This style of lighting is called *chiascuro* and was often used by the German expressionist film movement (in which Dracula's cinematographer, Karl Freund, was a key player).
- After Renfield cuts his finger, there is a tracking shot, across the room, into a close-up on Dracula's face. There has been very little camera movement in the sequence up to this moment, so the use of the zoom shows the startling effect the blood has on the Count.
- The sound effects in this sequence add to the sinister and threatening atmosphere, as does the Count's accent and delivery of dialogue. There is no incidental music or score to accentuate the action and create emotion. Candidates may wish to do a creative task where they select instrumental music to fit the scene. How does it change or emphasise the atmosphere?