

Edgar G. Ulmer's Film *The Black Cat*: An Eighty-Year Retrospective

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ABSTRACT

Director Edgar G. Ulmer's film *The Black Cat* was a rare achievement in American horror cinema when released in 1934. Some eighty years afterwards in 2014 *The Black Cat* warrants revisiting as one of the most unique and revered horror films ever made. *The Black Cat* is German expressionist in character, perverse and morbid, portraying the post-World War I gothic mind of Europe. The film encompasses the rage and revenge of that war with motifs of murder, narcotics, torture, necrophilia, incest, and Satanic rituals; all of which are witnessed by a young America couple who have innocently traveled into a nightmarish tragedy. Rarely has a film like *The Black Cat* so captured the mood of horror blended with an intellectual narrative, unique acting, modernist settings, and classical music. Paul A. Cantor said "*The Black Cat* was a triumph for Ulmer; many consider it one of the most sophisticated and powerful horror stories ever made" (p. 142). Years later *The Black Cat* would be characterized as an "art film," and even "read as a piece of intellectual cinema" (Schwaab, p. 46).

Introduction

Director Edgar G. Ulmer was born in 1904, Olomouc, Czechoslovakia and grew up in Vienna, Austria. Ulmer led a storied life that passed back and forth through the metropolitan cities of Europe and America, finally settling in Hollywood, California. In 1972 Edgar R. Ulmer passed away in Woodland Hills, California.

"Ulmer's early film career was undoubtedly auspicious, although it has been somewhat embellished by grandiose and largely specious claims made by the director himself - or perhaps more accurately, by the émigré director, who no longer intended to return home and continually reinvented himself in America" (Isenberg, p. 2). Ulmer had his grand debut as the director for *The Black Cat* (1934) that anchored Hollywood's Universal horror cycle that started with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, both in 1931, and ended with *Son of Frankenstein* (1939).

Ulmer created a film that is entirely unlike any other made in Hollywood. Everson said, "The striking quality of the film creates a decidedly non-Hollywood and non-stereotyped horror film. The milieu and backgrounds are unusually convincing; its incidental background and establishing shots have the same look of subdued melancholy as many authentic East European films of the period" (p. 123).

Unique to the neophyte director Ulmer was the degree of individual initiative he was allowed in making the film. George Carol Sims (pen name Peter Ruric) wrote the screenplay based on Ulmer's scenario. The settings of the film's scenes were heavily influenced by Ulmer's sense of style and design with Charles D. Hall serving as Art Director. The unusually unique camera compositions for the film were under the direction of John J. Mescall with editing by Ray Curtiss. Heinz Eric Roemheld compiled the classical musical scoring for the film. That such a remarkable film, under 65-minutes in length, was completed on time (fifteen days) and on budget (\$95,000) was an accomplishment that would become a trademark of Ulmer's filmmaking. For Universal Studios, *The Black Cat* was a box-office success generating over \$236,000 in profit.

Of special note was Ulmer's relative freedom of censorship over the morbid mix of perversions that characterize the personalities of the two primary actors. The studio censor, Joseph Breen, urged caution on scenes involving torture, like "skinning alive," nudity, and allusions to rape, incest and necrophilia in the film. Worland addressed Breen's lenient regard for the Black Mass scenes that "devil worship seemingly fell within acceptable bounds so long as there was no suggestion of the performance of any sexual rite" (p. 125). However

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on one issue, Breen was very adamant that there be no mistreatment of the black cat at any time. True to Breen's edict, Boris Karloff would be seen in several scenes tenderly holding and petting the black cat comfortably draped in his arms. The black cat would go on to freely prowl the hallways of the house and underground fortress, appearing in several dramatic scenes.

Unknowingly, Ulmer had "dodged" the future censorship bullet. Just months after the release of *The Black Cat* in mid-1934 Hollywood instituted a new program of censorship rules known as the PCA or Production Code Administration (Schumach). Given the censorship strict rules of the PCA *The Black Cat* would have never been released. For the next twenty years horror films would never be the same as they were before 1934.

In large part Ulmer owed his success with the film to the roles played by two leading actors Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. Both actors were originally from Europe; Boris Karloff was born William Henry Pratt in London, England and Bela Lugosi was born Béla Ferenc Dezső Blaskó in Romania. Boris Karloff never became an American citizen. Bela Lugosi became an American citizen in 1931. Praising the duo Greg Mank commented, "*The Black Cat* would be their most glorious teaming. Karloff's Lascivious Lucifer versus Lugosi's Avenging Angel makes *The Black Cat* transcend the horror movie genre, and become a grand, lunatic fairy tale, sparked by a wickedly imaginative director, a bewitched camera and a properly epic romantic score" (p. 198).

An Ominous Beginning

Over the years since the release of *The Black Cat* many scholars have examined literally every aspect of the film. Many judgments of the film have been made across the passage of time from 1934 right into the new millennia of 2014. Some aspects of these studies are presented and elaborated upon in this essay. In particular Edgar G. Ulmer's role for the black cat in the film is given more acclaim than in past commentaries.

The story begins with scenes of transit, a crowded bustling European train station with carts of luggage and bags passing back and forth. Aboard the Orient Express are the newly weds Peter (David Manners) and Joan Allison (Julie Bishop) traveling to the Carpathian Mountains. Peter and Joan are shown affectionately in their cheery, brightly lit compartment anticipating their arrival at a luxury resort. Dr. Vitus Werdegast (Bela Lugosi) intrudes politely and the scene suddenly turns serious and somber. The matrimonial bliss of the Alison's disappears. "Werdegast is enraptured by the sight of Joan, who Ulmer captures in several revealing point-of-view shots – a foretelling sign of things to come" (Isenberg, pp. 5-6). In these scenes Werdegast has trespassed a treasured right of Americans – privacy, and yet an American sense of politeness opens the door to their journey through the coming Hell.

After the train arrives at their destination, Werdegast and the Americans share a ride in a bus during a raging rainstorm. Werdegast's destination is Hjalmar Poelzig's (Boris Karloff) home for a reunion of sorts. The bus driver tells the story of the where the house is built: "All of this country was one of the greatest battlefields of the war. Tens of thousands of men died here. The ravine down there was piled twelve deep with dead and wounded men. The little river below was swollen red, a raging torrent of blood. And that high hill yonder where Engineer Poelzig now lives was the site of Fort Marmorus. He built his home on its very foundations. Marmorus is the greatest graveyard in the world" (*The Black Cat*). In creating this grim setting for the home of Poelzig, Ulmer no doubt called upon the photographic record of the devastation and perhaps even more so given his propensity for German expressionism, the paintings of the German artists George Grosz and Otto Dix. Both artists had served in The Great War (World War I) and afterwards created painted canvases showing the gruesome realities of war in the trenches.

On route the bus slides off a small ravine and the driver is killed. Joan is rendered unconscious. Peter, Werdegast, and Werdegast's valet carrying Joan make their way to Poelzig's home. The continuing rainstorm adds to the gloomy trek. Once inside Poelzig's house, Werdegast administers a narcotic to Joan ostensibly to rest her during her recovery.

"A Masterpiece of Construction"

Alison Peirse said "The American horror genre may provide certain necessary narrative tropes for the film, but it is the Bauhaus that provides a physical frame for the building, while art deco inspires the (interior) decoration" (p. 106). The Gothic atmosphere of the film is not lost despite taking place in a modernistic house

whose design is in the Bauhaus style of architecture (Architecture of Film). The exterior is one of straight, clean lines, with brightly lit strip windows. The interior consists of tiled ceilings and walls, art deco furnishings (tubular chairs and tables, neon adorned and accentuated speaker grilles, sliding doors, continuously lit ceiling panels, curved metal staircases, and sliding doors).

Below the contemporary house, true to a Gothic setting is the fortress foundation with long corridors, spiral staircases, secret rooms, and rotating mounts for large artillery guns (that were removed during the building of the house). The fortress is clinically clean and minimalist in style; no H.P. Lovecraft dungeons, cobwebs, water seepage between rotted castle stones, or rats running amok. Ulmer's setting for the story no doubt was to praise Europe's leadership in design and at the same time speak to the horrors that underlay such leadership.

Below the hill of the house is a desolate wasteland of death with thousands of twisted crosses marking the graves of fallen soldiers. However modernistic the house may have been, it nevertheless had an atmosphere that was sinister and foreboding. Werdegast confronts Poelzig telling him his house is "a masterpiece of construction built upon the ruins of a masterpiece of destruction" (*The Black Cat*). Peter confines in Werdegast, "This is a very tricky house. Well, I suppose we've got to have architects too. If I wanted to build a nice, cozy, unpretentious insane asylum, he'd (Hjalmar Poelzig) be the man for it" (*The Black Cat*). Ulmer had a way of taking a "dig" at the America sense of architectural style. However ingenuous, Peter had justification for using the term "insane asylum."

The Story

The film's plot is rivalry and revenge. During World War I Poelzig, as commander, turned traitorous and surrendered Fortress Marmorus to the Russians. Werdegast, a fellow soldier, was taken prisoner for fifteen years in the Russian Kurgaal prison camp leaving behind his wife and young daughter. Upon his return Werdegast found that Poelzig had married his wife, murdered her and then married his daughter who later would also be murdered.

Ulmer's choice of the musical scoring for the film was very somber. Heinz Eric Roemheld compiled a selection of classical music that provided a dark and intense mood throughout the entire film. Ulmer was praised for his "unabashed use of European classical music, with passages from Bach, Brahms, Chopin, Liszt, Schubert, Schumann and Tchaikovsky, often used as Wagnerian leitmotifs to highlight the action" (Cantor, p. 138). While dialogue in the film was sparse, the classical music kept audiences in a continuous state of intense apprehension. Ulmer's use of classical music for musical scoring was just another example of his attempt to emphasize European high culture in contrast, arguably, to the cultural naiveté of America.

The film states forthrightly in the opening credits (against the shadow of a black cat) that the story is loosely based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*. In reality the film has no relationship whatsoever to Poe's story *The Black Cat*. "However, in its mood and its oppressive, claustrophobic, and generally unhealthy atmosphere, it does evoke a very definite feeling of Poe – allied perhaps with a Kafka-esque sense of entrapment, futility, and hopelessness (Everson, p. 122). For Ulmer his story of *The Black Cat* would be symbolic of the recurring European strife that like the cat with nine lives, Europe always resurrects itself to repeat the same course of destructive events. Ulmer's subliminal warnings in *The Black Cat* would prove truly prophetic for in just five years after the film was completed (1939) Europe would arise from the dead and World War II starting the carnage all over again.

The Cat

For many years after *The Black Cat* many reviewers and critics, popular and academic, took issue with the role of the cat in the film. Many felt the cat was a gimmick simply inserted in the film because of the film's title. Others felt the cat's only role was to stroll around the sets. On closer consideration, it was apparent that Ulmer orchestrated a sequence of scenes in which the black cat seemingly served as a catalyst to set the dark temperament for the entire film. At the beginning of the film, Werdegast, Poelzig, and Peter are exchanging introductions over a drink. A black cat walks past an opened door and suddenly turns and glares at Werdegast. Panic-stricken, Werdegast drops his drink, retreats, picking up a dining knife and hurls it at the cat. Off

screen the cat is heard to shriek but not seen, a testament to censor Breen's objection that the cat not be seen as harmed, let alone killed.

Joan Peters literally glides into the scene and as if in a trance and confronts Werdegast asking "You are frightened, doctor?" Peter puzzled by Joan's behavior is told by Werdegast "It is perhaps the narcotic. I have seen it affect certain people very oddly. One cannot be sure. Sometimes, these cases take strange forms. The victim becomes in a sense, 'mediumistic,' a vehicle for all the intangible forces in operation around her" (*The Black Cat*). The point that Werdegast appears to have missed is that Joan may be serving as a "medium" for the black cat conveying an ominous message to the doctor.

One of the most often acclaimed qualities of the film is the exceptionally literate delivery of dialogue. Ulmer takes advantage of the speech patterns and especially the accents of the Karloff and Lugosi in delivering their lines. In the black cat phobia sequence, Karloff explaining the phobia that has just caused Dr. Vitus Werdegast to throw a knife killing his cat delivers a beautifully spoken little monologue about the "extreme form" of the phobia, climaxed with the explanation that Lugosi suffers from "... "an all consuming horror-of cats" (*The Black Cat*). Karloff's diction adds immeasurably to the effectiveness of the lines; the word "horror" is emphasized given a sensual and menacing intonation, while a pregnant pause, and lifting of the eyes upward in a mock-religious expression, a slight hissing in the final sound, gives the simple phrase "of cats" a genuinely frightening connotation. The music too, subdued to give dominance to the dialogue, matches the mounting climax of Karloff's diagnosis.

Werdegast adds the comment that "However, certain ancient books say that the Black Cat is the living embodiment of Evil. And if that Evil enters into the nearest living thing, it is..." Poelzig interrupts with "The Black Cat does not die. Those same books, if I'm not mistaken, teach that the Black Cat is deathless, deathless as Evil. It is the origin of the common superstition. You know, the cat with nine lives" (*The Black Cat*). "The animal (the cat) warrants occupying the title of the film, Poe or no Poe, because it perfectly symbolizes the "living dead" condition of the arch-enemies Poelzig and Werdegast, who in turn, together, embody the horror of the war, its opened Pandora's box of inhumanity and almost inconceivable cruelty, and its profound shadow haunting Europe" (Grunes). This episode ends with Poelzig escorting his guests to their rooms. The latter sequence of scenes sets the sinister agenda for the role of the black cat as the film unfolds.

The Fortress Tomb

Later that same night, the camera tracks Poelzig tenderly petting the black cat draped in his arms as he descends into the subterranean chambers of the fortress underlying his modernistic home. Poelzig slowly moves about a gallery of transparent glass-encased displays, each with the dead body of beautiful women floating as if in suspended in midair. With a wave of Poelzig's hand across the darken display cases, a faint glow illuminates the entombed figures giving them an ethereal presence.

When Werdegast demands to know where his wife and daughter are, Poelzig takes him to his gallery of entombed women. Standing before a showcase Werdegast recognizes the beautiful blond haired women, his wife Karen (Lucille Lund). Poelzig tells Werdegast, "You see, Vitus, I have cared for her tenderly and well. You will find her almost as beautiful as when you last saw her" (*The Black Cat*). Poelzig explains that

Karen died of pneumonia two years after the war and that his daughter (also named Karen) had also died. Poelzig adds "Is she not beautiful? I wanted to have her beauty - always." Poelzig's obvious allusion to a sense of necrophilia underlies his collection of preserved women.

Enraged, Werdegast pulls out a revolver telling Poelzig he is going to kill him. Again, the black cat suddenly appears, glaring at Werdegast who in sheer terror drops his revolver, covering his eyes in terror, stumbles through a glass plotting board. Poelzig picks up the weapon, his life saved by his guardian black cat. Still dazed by his encounter with the black cat Werdegast is lectured by Poelzig, "You say your soul was killed and that you have been dead all these years. And what of me? Did we not both die here in Marmorus fifteen years ago? Are we any the less victims of the war than those bodies were torn asunder? Are we not both the living dead? And now you come to me, playing at being an avenging angel—childishly thirsty for my blood. We understand each other too well. We know too much of life (*The Black Cat*)." Later Poelzig and Werdegast will play a "chess game of death" for the right to possess Peter's wife Joan. For Werdegast Joan will be set free, for Poelzig Joan will serve as a sacrifice in a Black Mass.

In a later scene, Poelzig's step-daughter-wife Karen opens a door adjoining Joan's bedroom. As Karen meets Joan the black cat runs from her bedroom to greet Poelzig just as he opens Joan's bedroom door. Poelzig hears Joan tell Karen that her father is alive and not dead as she was told by Poelzig. Gently picking up the black cat Poelzig forces Karen into their bedroom where she screams and is presumably murdered.

The Americans

Ulmer assures the viewing audience early on in the film that the Americans are not in the same cultural or intellectual league as Werdegast and Poelzig. In a scene with Werdegast who is a renowned psychiatrist and Poelzig a noted modernist architect are discussing their respective professions, Peter confesses "as for myself I'm a writer of unimportant books" (*The Black Cat*).

However much the American couple is caught up in the fiendish vendetta between Werdegast and Poelzig they are most often sleeping, sedated, fainting, and knocked unconscious by accidents or deliberate assault. They appear in brief scenes with small of lines of dialogue. Ulmer appears to be playing the Americans as puppets largely unaware of the nightmare swirling around them. Joan Alison may be excused for the portrayal as a naive American for she says very little that is dismissive of European high culture. Although at one point early in the film upon meeting Poelzig Joan is unable to pronounce a German umlaut and refers to Poelzig as "Mr. Pigslow." Prior to the black cat phobia sequence Peter curiously touches a furnishing on a table, an art deco-styled radio, only to be assisted by Poelzig as if Peter were a child. Poelzig turns the pointer (rather than a dial) to a station that, of course, is playing classical music. In the same scene Peter dismisses a macabre theory (explaining Joan's trance-like behavior) as "superstitious baloney," to which Lugosi, breaking up an ordinary line into an orchestration of musical syllables, replies "Superstitious, perhaps, *baloney*, perhaps not!" "Each of the five words underlined by the slightest shift in facial expression" (Everson, p. 123).

Poelzig determines to kill Peter while he sleeping but is interrupted by Werdegast. Peter awakes as Werdegast leads Poelzig away, saying to himself, "Next time I'm going to Niagara Falls" (*The Black Cat*). The rivalry begins as Poelzig suggests a chess game with Joan as the prize. Watching the chess game in progress Peter is unaware of the "stakes" and comments he "used to play a very good hand of poker." Again Ulmer undermines the American's cultural naive sense of a game as complicated as chess. Werdegast is checkmated and loses the contest for Joan. Poelzig later celebrates by playing a Bach toccata that reverberates throughout the fortress.

The chess game denotes a conscious effort on Ulmer's part to use figurines in the film to sense the undercurrent of sexual desires of Werdegast and Poelzig. Earlier in the film as Peter kisses Joan before leading her back to bed, Poelzig in a close-up shot tightly grips the long thin leg of an outstretched woman art deco figurine on a nearby table. During the chess game as Werdegast and Poelzig talk of Joan, Werdegast in a close-up shot slowly strokes with his fingers along the length of the Queen chess piece.

The End

The end of *The Black Cat* comes in a fast paced sequence of scenes that encompass a Black Mass, torture, escape, and an explosion. Despite the concerns of censor Breen, Ulmer managed to keep the Black Mass sequence of scenes and the "frying alive" of Poelzig. In an early scene Poelzig is laying in bed next to his young beautiful blond wife, actually his stepdaughter. She is dressed in a very sheer white negligee while Poelzig is dressed in very chic black sleep attire. He is reading a book entitled *Rites of Lucifer*. Late in the film Poelzig prepares to conduct a Satanic Mass before a group of worshippers with Joan as the sacrifice. At the beginning of the ceremony a female participant screams and collapses for unknown reasons. During the commotion Werdegast is able to abduct the unconscious body of Joan and take her to the underground chambers.

Poelzig goes looking for Werdegast and a fight between the two ensures in the underground chambers. With help from his servant Thamal, Werdegast binds Poelzig to an embalming rack. Ripping off his white shirt revealing his naked chest Werdegast tells Poelzig he is going to have his vengeance for fifteen years of imprisonment and the stealing and murder of his wife and daughter. Werdegast selects a scalpel from a surgical kit and tells Poelzig in a close up camera shot "Do you know what I am going to do to you now? No? Did you ever see an animal skinned, Hjalmar? Ha, ha, ha. That's what I'm going to do to you now - flay and

tear the skin from your body...slowly...bit by bit!" Bearing in mind censor Breen's concern about this scene, Ulmer has the camera shoot only the shadowy motions cast against a wall of Werdegast slicing away strips of Poelzig's skin. The audience is only treated only to Poelzig's howls and moaning during the heinous scene. Joan witnesses the scene, screaming, and fainting (again).

Peter awakened from having been knocked out by Poelzig's henchman majordomo and now armed with a gun arrives to save Joan. Peter shoots Werdegast just as Joan tells him Werdegast saved her. Ulmer portrays Peter as the symbol of Americans to act on impulse (shoot first and ask questions later). Werdegast tells Peter, "You poor fool. I was only trying to help. Now go! Please go!"

Werdegast dying, tells Poelzig "It's the red switch, isn't it, Hjalmar? The red switch ignites the dynamite. Five minutes and Marmaros, you and I, and your rotten cult will be no more. The "red switch" is pulled triggering explosives beneath the fortress. Werdegast's last words are "It has been a good game". As the Peter and Joan flee, the entire fortress complex and house and are blown to bits, perhaps Ulmer's recalling of the expressionist painting by George Grosz in 1917, *The Explosion* (New York Museum of Modern Art).

Ulmer prepares an interesting epilogue that calls for reflection on the intent of the film. Returning on the train from their horrifying experiences with Werdegast and Poelzig, Peter reads a review of his most recent novel, *Triple Murder*. "Mr. Alison has in a sense overstepped the bounds of credibility. These things could never by the furthest stretch of the imagination actually happen. And we wish that Mr. Alison would confine himself to the possible, instead of letting his melodramatic imagination run away with him" (*The Black Cat*). Ulmer implies that Americans have a limited scope of experience and prefer to stay within the boundaries of their most immediate experience. Indeed that is exactly the way Peter and Joan move on unscathed and unscarred. Americans face what they must, laugh it off, and move on with their lives.

Conclusion

Cantor describes Ulmer's *Black Cat* as "a kind of elegy to European high culture that seemed to have killed itself off in the cataclysm of World War I and its aftermath. But it is also a tribute to Ulmer's new homeland, the United States, with all its optimism and moral decency and what he hoped might be its immunity to the European disease of corrosive nihilism" (p. 152).

At the time of making *The Black Cat* Ulmer would have known that the Nazi Party had come to power in Germany and that in just five short years another cataclysmic world war would begin. In 1946 George Grosz (now an American citizen) painted *The Pit* (Wichita Art Museum) capturing the unimaginable horrors of the World War II conflict and in 1947 painted *Glad to be Back* (Arizona State University), the canvas showing a horrid skeletal creature opening curtains to the hellish nightmare of another war in Europe. These paintings would have surely fascinated Ulmer as a continuing expressionist assessment of another European holocaust so foretold in *The Black Cat*. Worland expressed the view that "the importance of the Great War to the rise of Gothic horror in Europe and Hollywood was never more directly illustrated" than in *The Black Cat*. (p. 65). The film carries one over-riding theme, "Europeans are deeply neurotic, obsessive compulsive, and self-destructive, not to mention downright evil and even Satanic, while the Americans are free, open, good-natured, and optimistic" (Cantor, p. 147).

Nevertheless, *The Black Cat* although a distant cinematic relative on the family tree of horror, demands reverence and respect. After eighty years Ulmer's stylish cinematic creation of an era long past still manages to entrance and entice. "*The Black Cat* may not make much sense to modern day audiences and perhaps not even shocking but the film is still marvelously evocative" (Risnes).

In later years after having made *The Black Cat* Ulmer would resurrect himself literally creating the noir genre of cinema. Although tribute and acclaim would accompany his film *Detour* (1945), the genesis for many noir films to follow, his true legacy to this day continues to be *The Black Cat*.

Eighty years and counting, *The Black Cat* shows no lessening of critical interest in Ulmer's film. Books, essays, and Internet blogs on cinema continue to review and analyze *The Black Cat*. For further readings on *The Black Cat* and Edgar G. Ulmer, his life and films, consider *The Films of Edgar G. Ulmer*, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath (2009), *The Philosophy of Horror*, edited by Thomas Fahy (2010), *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film* (2013) by Alison Peirse, *The Cinema of Adventure, Romance, & Terror* (1989) edited by George E. Turner,

and especially *Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff: The Expanded Story of a Haunting Collaboration with a Complete Filmography of Their Films Together* (2009), author Gregory Mank. And of course to watch the movie *The Black Cat*, the highest quality DVD version available is *The Bela Lugosi Collection* provided by Universal.

Gregory Mank is presently preparing to publish what may well be the most comprehensive omnibus of information and commentary on *The Black Cat* to date. Mank's book, an 80th Anniversary Tribute Book, is entitled *THE BLACK CAT Howls Again!* Appropriately the book is due to be released around Halloween 2014 (BearManor Media/MagicImage Filmbooks).

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