

The Old Dark House and the Space of Attraction *The Old Dark House* et l'espace de l'attraction

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Article abstract

Writers have invoked the concept of the “cinema of attractions,” from early cinema studies, to claim that horror films sacrifice narrative integrity to deliver sudden frights and spectacular shocks. An examination of the history of the concept of the attraction, however, finds it heavily theorized by Sergei Eisenstein as something that can bind films together in powerful ways. In one horror film, *The Old Dark House* (1932), slamming doors, quaking thunder, shattering glass and a rampaging mute butler, while scary, also figure in James Whale's scheme to criss-cross his film with motifs and other repetitions and produce a work that gains with every viewing. Even with its thin narrative, stock characters and, already in 1932, very familiar story about characters trapped in an old dark house, the film hangs together in intricate ways. Most elaborately, Whale embeds attractions in a grid that overlays the tiered spaces of the setting. Characters move up and down the creaky staircases and along the suspended hallways, chasing each other, scuffling, and withholding and disclosing secrets. Scenographic and narrative space mesh into a tight unity lit up by a constellation of “fun house” jolts. Props, including lamps and knives, circulate through these spaces as well, tracing patterns that startle viewers while simultaneously rendering the film rigorously and beautifully coherent.

The Old Dark House and the Space of Attraction¹

Robert Spadoni

ABSTRACT

Writers have invoked the concept of the “cinema of attractions,” from early cinema studies, to claim that horror films sacrifice narrative integrity to deliver sudden frights and spectacular shocks. An examination of the history of the concept of the attraction, however, finds it heavily theorized by Sergei Eisenstein as something that can bind films together in powerful ways. In one horror film, *The Old Dark House* (1932), slamming doors, quaking thunder, shattering glass and a rampaging mute butler, while scary, also figure in James Whale’s scheme to criss-cross his film with motifs and other repetitions and produce a work that gains with every viewing. Even with its thin narrative, stock characters and, already in 1932, very familiar story about characters trapped in an old dark house, the film hangs together in intricate ways. Most elaborately, Whale embeds attractions in a grid that overlays the tiered spaces of the setting. Characters move up and down the creaky staircases and along the suspended hallways, chasing each other, scuffling, and withholding and disclosing secrets. Scenographic and narrative space mesh into a tight unity lit up by a constellation of “fun house” jolts. Props, including lamps and knives, circulate through these spaces as well, tracing patterns that startle viewers while simultaneously rendering the film rigorously and beautifully coherent.

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Introduction

Following Tom Gunning’s lead, where he sees the cinema of attractions not disappearing entirely but instead going “underground” (2006, p. 382), many who write about horror films find the genre exhibiting the strong tendency of early films to confront viewers with exhibitionist displays rather than draw them into self-contained narrative worlds. Some claim the genre as a whole bears a relationship to the cinema of attractions

(Worland 2007, p. 33; Sobchack 2004, p. 57), while others see this affinity flaring up at particular moments: with the appearance of 3-D horror films such as *House of Wax* (De Toth, 1953; see Heffernan 2004, p. 24); with the advent of “postmodern” horror films such as *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960; see Williams 2000, pp. 356-58); when summer blockbusters like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) come on the scene (Cook 2000, pp. 43-44); when horror filmmakers start using shock-cut editing strategies (Diffrient 2004, p. 59); and, later still, when they start using digital editing technology (Pierson 1999, p. 34). Whenever and however they see the cinema of attractions resurfacing, writers tend to find this development running in direct opposition to, or on parallel tracks with, a horror film’s narrative operations. Characteristic of this trend is Kevin Heffernan’s claim that the steady increase in violence and gore in horror films of the 1950s and 1960s represents an “ascendancy of the cinema of attractions at the expense of the cinema of narrative integration” (2004, p. 68).²

Gunning does not himself set these two impulses in such stark opposition. For him, the “earlier carnival of the cinema” (2006, p. 387) did not, when the movies developed into a story-telling form, condense into discrete nuggets of spectacle lodged in films, horror and otherwise, to give pleasure only when at the expense of narrative comprehension and integrity. Instead, “the often free-floating filmic attractions of early film became part of a narrative system as film unambiguously defined its primary role as a teller of tales, a constructor of narratives” (1994, p. 43). Attractions, in other words, became free-floating no more. In story films, even ones that rely as heavily on spectacle as horror, science fiction and action films, attractions enter into a relationship with each other and with the whole film; that is, they integrate not only with the film’s narrative but also with its stylistic system. Though, to be sure, the moment in a horror film when the knife shoots out of the shadows, the monster turns around to face us, or the alien cracks through the human host’s chest may leap to prominence in a viewing experience—and afterwards, it might be all or most of what we remember about the film—while we watch, our experience of such a moment is

deeply shaped by what we have seen, and before we leave the theatre, it will be reshaped by what we will see.

As Gunning notes, the idea of the attraction need not lead us away from appreciating the intrinsically embedded quality of these moments. Writers who are so led miss a major hermeneutic potential inherent in the concept, for when Gunning lifts this term not directly from the fairground and the carnival but from these places *through* Eisenstein, he appropriates a concept that has been richly defined in terms of its relationship with other attractions and with the total artwork.

In his 1923 essay entitled “The Montage of Attractions,” which he wrote about the theatre and which predates his first film, *Strike* (1924), Eisenstein defines attractions as “any aggressive moment . . . mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole” (1988, p. 34).³ Here, at the beginning of his writing about attractions, Eisenstein is emphasizing the importance of the order within the whole. In this way his initial conceptualization of the attraction reflects his career-long approach to film form, for across the corpus of his films and theoretical writings, Eisenstein works vigorously to forge and elucidate the linkages that make his films systematic, integrated, whole works. Though there has been debate over whether the arc of his career manifests mainly continuity or, as David Bordwell (1975) argued in a widely challenged essay written in the mid-1970s, more of an “epistemological shift,” my assertion is simply that Eisenstein always aimed for his films to hang together—and not loosely—through motifs and other sorts of repetitions, and that this kind of unity is what most people mean when they call an artwork “organic.”⁴ Again, attractions in Eisenstein’s films, far from detracting from or competing with this quality of the work, figure at its centre; and again, this function of the attraction did not take a while to coalesce in Eisenstein’s thinking. From the beginning, attractions are attractions only when they are part of a system. When, in his 1924 “Montage of Film Attractions” essay, he refers to “montage fragments,” he means attractions; and when he refers to “attractional schemas,” he is fitting attractions into larger patterns (1988a, pp. 41 and 44).

Attractions are thus like any other element in a film—and as he told a class of film students in the 1930s: “Each successive element is subordinate to its particular ‘boss.’ The shot is a rank-and-file soldier, the editing-unit is the squad leader, the *mise-en-scène* the platoon-commander, and so on. An iron discipline” (Nizhny 1962, p. 78). In his “Epistemological Shift” essay, Bordwell (1975, p. 41) claims that Eisenstein, later in his career, “reads the organic model backwards into his own films.” I suggest that Eisenstein does this because “the organic model” deeply informed his approach to putting those films together.

It is in light of this principle of organicism built into the concept of the attraction that I wish to revisit the notion that attractions in horror films weaken the films’ formal unity. This will be through a study of one horror film, James Whale’s *The Old Dark House* (1932). If it seems that this modest, 72-minute genre film, however highly regarded it and its director have come to be, could not possibly bear the weight of an “Eisensteinian” approach to its formal workings, Eisenstein himself gives us licence at least to try. In “The Montage of Film Attractions,” he writes that “the American detective film and, to an even greater extent, the American comedy film (the method in its pure form) provide inexhaustible material for the study of these methods (admittedly on a purely formal level, ignoring content)” (Eisenstein 1988a, p. 44). Granting that such a distinction between “form” and “content” can be made, if only to allow ourselves to be enlightened by Eisenstein’s formalist sensibility while bracketing off his revolutionary aims, let us examine how *The Old Dark House* pops and flashes with attractions that startle and thrill its viewers while, at the same time, they work to make the film rigorously cohere.⁵

Attractions loose and fixed

S. M. explains to the students that the dramatic structure of a film must provide for alternation of moments of tension and respite, rise and fall in intensity of action, resulting in a sort of staircase shape.

Vladimir Nizhny (1962, pp. 33-34)

It is a series of dramatic entrances and exits; Karloff crashing through a heavily timbered door, a hand appearing on the banister at the top of the stairs, staying there until it is almost forgotten, then its owner making a dramatic appearance on a near-empty stage; moments of genuine shock providing a form of “curtain,” to be followed by a “buffer” scene of tranquility before the next thrill sequence develops.

William K. Everson (1974, p. 81)
on *The Old Dark House*

First, if we can establish that the “attractions” in *The Old Dark House* (hereafter *ODH*) are firmly anchored in the film’s formal structures, what if anything can we infer from this about the genre as a whole? The film’s first critics do not offer us much help with this question, for they found *ODH* simultaneously typical and distinctive among films of its type. A reviewer, for example, called the film “one of the year’s best penny dreadfuls” (Scheuer 1932, p. A7), while another claimed that *ODH* is “as fantastic, vague and incredible as the rest, but rises high above the average of this type of entertainment through its exceedingly clever individual characterization and brilliant direction.”⁶ Critics over the years have echoed the initial reviewers’ impressions of the film as “a sophisticated example” (Newman 1996, p. 237).⁷

How then do we best view the film: as representative or exceptional? One can try to place *ODH* within the horror tradition by tracing continuities that link it to films released in the years just preceding and following. The fondness for gin to which Horace Femm (Ernest Thesiger) confesses calls to mind the same by Dr. Pretorius (also played by Thesiger) in *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), while Boris Karloff’s mute, scarred, hulking menace reminds us of his turn as the monster in that film and in *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931). One can also compare the “He’s alive!” shouted by Gladys Perkins (Lilian Bond) when,

in *ODH*, she discovers that Roger Penderel (Melvyn Douglas) has not died after falling from a second floor gallery to the “It’s alive!” shouted by Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive) when, in the 1931 film, his creation comes to life.⁸ But the contrasting circumstances of this last pair of similarities highlight a major difference between *ODH* and the most prominent films in its cycle. Penderel points to this difference when, outside the house, after remarking that his knocks should have been “loud enough to wake the dead,” he adds: “Wouldn’t it be dramatic? Supposing the people inside were dead, all stretched out with the lights quietly burning about them.” In another horror film, the same band of travellers might encounter not only such a scene but one in which the corpses, like those in *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein*, stir with unnatural life. But *ODH* is not that kind of horror film. As *Variety* noted, “‘Dark House,’ unlike the Drac-Frank-Zomb school, makes no pretext at the mystic or fantastic.”⁹ Moreover, if the film’s dark hallway lined with ghostly, billowing curtains looks like the one in *The Cat and the Canary* (Leni, 1927), the most popular of the old dark house mystery films of the 1920s, *ODH* deviates from this template as well. At least one reviewer noticed that, unlike in other such mysteries, no one in this one is murdered.¹⁰ *ODH* features no will to be read at midnight, no disgruntled non-heirs, no secret rooms hidden behind trick bookcases, no stolen jewels, and no revelation of which beloved uncle is the killer, kidnapper or fake spook.¹¹

In substitution for perambulating corpses and a mounting death toll, *ODH* offers what many who praise the film have called its *restraint*.¹² But the film does not merely tone down the same elements that other horror films fling at viewers with a heavier hand. *ODH* also blends these elements in sublimely artful ways. Here is a potential problem for anyone wishing to generalize from observations about the attractions in *ODH* to ones in other horror films. We must somehow come to terms with the film’s exceptionality in this regard.

Admirers call *ODH* Whale’s “most stylized film to this date” (Brunas, Brunas and Weaver 1990, p. 44), a film “purely stylized” (Mank 1988, p. 47), his “finest personal distillation of the

bizarre” (Edwards 1957, p. 98), “a crescendo of bizarrerie” (Hardy 1994, p. 54) and “a dazzling display of grotesquerie” (Clarens 1997, p. 65). They find the film “shot through in almost every scene by a wholly individual sense of comic timing and bizarre juxtaposition” (Pym 1979, p. 159), in which “the different elements blend totally and satisfyingly together” (Denton 1979, p. 13), combining “maximum theatrical flamboyance with formidable cinematic grace and superb character acting” (Lugowski 2007, p. 80). For another, “the magic of *The Old Dark House* resides in the awesome interaction of its many components” (Soister 1999, p. 140). Why have so many characterized this film as a wonderfully bizarre *mixture*?

Partially accounting for these impressions is what is not there to prevent viewers from appreciating the whole film versus only isolated parts of it. First, the narrative does not play the role traditionally accorded to it as the dominant force that makes the whole film cohere and minutely guides the viewing experience. Reflecting on why *ODH* tends to disappoint on a first viewing, William K. Everson (1974, p. 81) writes that “nothing really seems to happen.” Reed Ellis (1980, p. 137), in his perceptive analysis of the film, writes that “the plot of *House* is not an important element in the film. Instead, the significant points are its mood and atmosphere.”¹³ Second, there is no makeup design as outrageous as Jack Pierce’s for the Frankenstein monster, and no character as rivetingly central as the monster or as Bela Lugosi’s Count Dracula, to overwhelm and compensate for the thin story. Despite an opening screen of text that singles out Karloff and his role as “the mad butler” Morgan, the star frequently plays at the fringes of what is essentially an ensemble acting showcase.¹⁴ Rather than present one hero or romantic couple to root for, the film gives us, in the stranded travellers, a “mass protagonist” of sorts, evident in stagings in which two or more figures act as one (Figs. 1-3). This group joins forces not against a single monster hiding out in a crypt or dungeon but against a gallery of antagonists ranging from the humorously strange to the psychopathic.

Until Penderel and Saul (Brember Wills) emerge at the climax as, respectively, the main hero and villain, viewer interest is



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Fig. 1. *The Old Dark House* (James Whale, 1932).
Grouped figures bow...



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 2. ...implore...



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 3. ...and look

spread across a number of characters on both sides. This, like the uncomplicated story, helps to direct attention to the whole film as an orchestration of effects—a stylish, if ghoulish, cinematic feast. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the film’s bristling cinematic dynamism also gathers force from its theatricality. Writers on *ODH* have noted that the central set, the house’s main hall, resembles a proscenium stage (Curtis 1998, p. 176), and that Whale “handles the film much like a play: it is a series of dramatic entrances and exits” (Everson 1974, p. 81).¹⁵ This theatricality, far from being something Whale had to overcome in order to make *ODH* come alive as a film, shapes and energizes many choices he makes regarding camera movements and angles, editing patterns, and much else that one might call the film’s cinematic bravura. Here, in the grounding of these choices in the sets and staging, Whale calls to mind Eisenstein, whose approach to montage strongly derived from the same.¹⁶ The importance of *mise-en-scène* to editing for Eisenstein is suggested by his requirement, noted by Vance Kepley (1993, p. 2), that his students “spend a full year on theatrical *mise-en-scène* without even discussing cinematic techniques.” (We can also note that, in the earlier quote, Eisenstein calls *mise-en-scène* the “platoon-commander,” while the editing-unit receives the mere rank of “squad leader.”) Whale’s play-like scenography, I will claim, pushes his film closer to Eisenstein’s “pure cinema.”

The film’s weak story, high number of more or less equally weighted characters, and overt theatricality all facilitate Whale’s deployment of a battery of attractions. It might seem at first glance that his plan involves less of a systematic coordination and more of a scattershot, “try anything” approach. For example, viewers are granted an unobstructed view of Margaret Waverton (Gloria Stuart) taking off her wet clothes and putting on a clinging satin gown. *Variety* commented on what it saw as the dubious motivation for this costume change, writing that her “extreme décolletage was rather uncalled for, considering the locale. Still, if there wasn’t the s. a. angle, mebbe Morgan wouldn’t get all hot and bothered as he did.”¹⁷ And like the “sex appeal angle,” the film’s chills also might appear to mesh only loosely with the overall design. The Exhibitors’ Campaign for

ODH gave this advice to theatre managers: "It will be a good idea, at least for the first showing of 'The Old Dark House,' to plant a few women in the audience with instructions to scream at certain high-spots in the picture: When the maniac hurls his knife, when the monster first comes down the stairs, when the hand reaches out and clutches the girl, etc."¹⁸ Such "high-spots," punctuated by live screams, would arguably produce a jolt regardless of where in the film Whale inserted them and, for that matter, what sort of film he packed around them.

Such an argument would be misguided, however, for these moments constitute peaks resting firmly on a meticulously mapped-out landscape. Whale avoids stylistic flourishes that do not serve a grounded purpose. His compact film is a model of economy. Characters are deftly drawn, in a few strokes, through their speech patterns. Horace's "Have a potato," which he twice repeats to humorous effect, like his remark about gin, establishes him as an eccentric host, while his sister, Rebecca (Eva Moore), is characterized by the "No beds!" she shrieks at her unwelcome guests. Harry Benshoff (1997, p. 43) points out the air of stringent sexual prohibition conveyed by this line; repeated like Horace's "Have a potato" until it starts to lose its meaning, this line also underscores Rebecca's birdlike nature. The words, as their semantic content starts to drain out of them, increasingly sound like shrill *cawing*, noises that suit a character who jabs her finger while speaking and sharply plucks some pickled onions for herself at dinner. To Rebecca's shrieking, and Horace's pleasantly strange line deliveries, Whale adds Morgan's inarticulate mumbling, a reflection of the character's possibly subhuman personality. His muteness counterweights Rebecca's deafness, while the persistently voiced fear that he might start drinking (we don't yet know exactly why this would be a bad thing) rhymes with Horace's apparently harmless fondness for gin.

Contributing to the impressions of balance, economy and unity is the way individual elements serve multiple functions and multiple elements serve the same function. Consider props. Horace picks up some flowers and a glass bowl, makes a sardonic remark, and tosses the flowers in the fire. Now the bowl is in a position to produce one of the visual and sonic bursts that dot

the film: moments later, on hearing that the floodwaters outside are rising, he drops the bowl, shattering it.¹⁹ Another prop comes into play when the electricity goes out and we learn that Horace is afraid to go upstairs and get a lamp. His reticence starts viewers wondering what is so terrible about going upstairs. This same lamp will come crashing down on Morgan's head when he goes on a drunken rampage. The lamp also figures in a motif involving electric and candlelight, and this pattern, too, serves more than one purpose. Horace's remark that "we make our own electric light here" reminds viewers of the remoteness of the location and, like the humming generator in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974)—another film in which a group of "ordinary" people encounter a lethally dysfunctional family—announces that these travellers have moved "off the grid." Also, once the electricity fails, lighting that already was shaky becomes even more erratic as smoky, guttering candlelight and firelight throw plumes of restless shadows against grimy walls and combine with the swallowing darkness to set off Whale's theatrical stagings with greater vividness. So does a water motif, when rain drizzling down windowpanes casts undulating shadows on the walls. Water, like candlelight, performs double duty when driving rain, and thunder and lightning, send Margaret back inside after an ugly encounter with Rebecca has just driven her out. Water serves a third function if one counts, as one in a skein of Biblical allusions, Rebecca's warning to her worldly guests and her blasphemous brother that "the rain's pouring in, the flood's rising!"²⁰

Other criss-crossing patterns further unify the film. One is a hand motif that includes Morgan's hand reaching into the frame, above a frightened Margaret's head, and closing a door; and several shots of a hand resting at the top of a banister, signalling the arrival of the pyromaniac brother, Saul, who has been locked in an upstairs room all along (Fig. 4). Another motif links flames and knives. Flames are omnipresent when, throughout the film, candles throw up tongues of weak illumination that are barely able to beat back the swaths of enveloping blackness. Late in the film, Saul sits with a knife in his hand and a lit candle close by (Fig. 5). He will tell Penderel: "Flames are



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 4. The second shot of Saul's hand on the banister.



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 5. "Flames are really knives."

really knives. They're cold, my friend, sharp and cold as snow. They burn like ice." Saul suggests that even Margaret's satin gown can escape being labelled a gratuitous thrill. Actress Gloria Stuart recalled that when she asked Whale why she had to wear the gown, he told her: "As you run, and later, as Karloff chases you, I want you to go through the halls like a *flame*" (Mank 1988, p. 46). Whale seems to have followed an impulse similar to one Eisenstein articulated to his students when, for a classroom exercise, they staged the murder scene in *Crime and Punishment*: "Raskolnikov must try to conceal the hatchet as long as possible. However, during this concealment the director must give some hint of the hatchet" (Nizhny 1962, p. 121).

Space

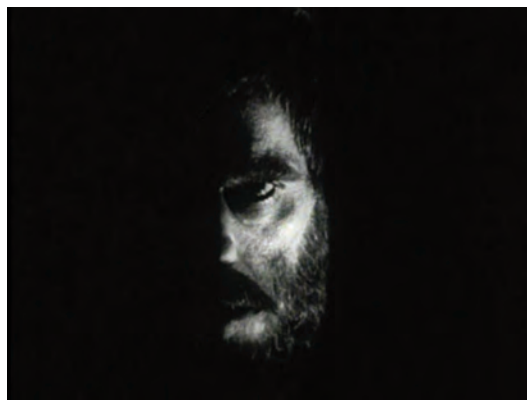
You must work out a scheme of where and on what spaces—zones of action—each section is to be played. The division between the sections of the story must also be rendered spatially: each action-fragment or section must have its own allotted space and develop on it.

Eisenstein, as reported
by Nizhny (1962, p. 34)

Nowhere is the film's binding coherence, and the attraction's pivotal place within it, more clear than in Whale's construction and deployment of space. If every classical Hollywood film situates its narrative action in a legible scenographic space, Whale's film does this more diagrammatically and voraciously than most. Each member of the Femm family moves about in the house or stays put according to "rules" that viewers only gradually discover. The real power structure under-girding the household is glimpsed when Horace orders Morgan to show Philip Waverton (Raymond Massey) where he can park his car, and Morgan hesitates and looks at Rebecca, who nods, and only then carries out the instruction.²¹ Rebecca might be harmless, but she is louder and more unpleasant than Horace, and she has more control over Morgan than her brother does. Later Horace, nervous at the prospect of being cut off by the storm, says: "Morgan is an uncivilized brute. Sometimes he drinks heavily. A night like this will set him going, and once he's drunk, he's rather dangerous." The butler, we are led to believe, is the worst menace in the house, and this is why his drinking escalates the threat level. But viewers will begin to learn later that this is only half true when, at the dinner table, Horace refers to "Sau—" which is as far as he gets before Rebecca's "Stop!" silences him. The moment tells us what we already knew about the brother and sister's relationship, while hinting that someone or something else on the premises is more terrifying than Morgan. (The butler turns out to be a red herring, or more accurately, as I will claim, a cog.²²) Teasingly,

Horace's half utterance simultaneously divulges and withholds key narrative information. This happens again when Saul makes his entrance in the final act. Looking fearful and diminutive, he presents himself as the most persecuted figure in the house. Then a shot of his face at a moment when only viewers can see it reveals that this character will make up for any perceived deficiencies in his size and appearance with murderous craziness. Finally, less a character and more of an information stop—for Margaret, her husband Philip, and viewers—is Roderick Femm (Elspeth, billed as "John," Dudgeon), the 102-year-old bedridden patriarch of the family. As Ellis (1980, p. 157) writes, "Sir Roderick's basic purpose is to impart needed plot information." Roderick, in his bedchamber, tells the couple: "They didn't tell you about Saul. Saul is the worst you know." Whale, as noted, will, before he confirms this assessment, fleetingly undermine it; he toys with viewers in this scene as well, imparting vital information while he takes his time. The ancient Femm, before telling them about Saul, sleepily says, "I would like to tell you all about it, but... there may not be time." This parceling out of information—who in the house has power over whom, and where everyone is—this articulation of the film's *narrative space*, meshes tightly with the film's strikingly realized physical spaces.

Some of the games Whale plays with space follow conventions of the horror genre. To ratchet up tension and excitement, he herds the travellers into a place where rain, a lake-like puddle at the bottom of the front steps, and two landslides hem them in. The travellers thus find themselves not only in a remote place but in one where elemental forces conspire to keep them there. Another familiar pattern, related to the meting out of narrative information, involves the concealment of and the delayed, or partial, disclosure of spaces and their contents. Whale initiates this pattern playfully at the beginning of the film when, after a minute of Margaret and Philip bickering in the front seat, the camera tracks to pick up a third character, Penderel, asleep in the back. When Morgan answers their knocks, he first cracks open the door and peers at them (Fig. 6); then, five shots later, he opens it wider to reveal his whole face. Later, Margaret is having fun casting hand shadows on the wall



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 6

when Rebecca appears and pokes her. Whale both shows and doesn't show us this confrontation by placing it in off-screen space and unfolding it as shadow-play (Fig. 7).

Other ways Whale creates and uses space are more unique to this film. Intrinsically a part of his approach is the patchy, minimalist visual canvas, which finds a counterpart on the sound-track where, aside from the opening credits, there is no non-diegetic music but only creaks, thunder, jeering wind and other noises. As Everson (1974, p. 82) writes, the "constant sounds of wind, rain, thunder, flapping shutters, billowing curtains, forms its own kind of symphony."

Against this spare backdrop Whale stretches the action, most notably, along two axes. One traces a vector that runs from the



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 7

spatial recesses to the foregrounds. Eisenstein too experimented with movements that thrust boldly at the spectator. The parasol surging toward the camera at the start of the Odessa Steps sequence in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) comes to mind, as do, in exercises with his students, stagings which, as Bordwell (1993, p. 161) notes, emphasize “depth and projection, with the spectator as the constant and explicit reference point”—for example, when a character “jabs a candelabrum at the audience,” and when, in the *Crime and Punishment* exercise, “Raskolnikov strikes, [and] the hatchet swings out toward the viewer.” We can compare these “aggressive moments,” recalling Eisenstein’s 1924 manifesto, to when Morgan, thrashing around in the kitchen, smashes his fist through a window (Fig. 8). Less jolting, perhaps, but more stunning, is Horace’s introduction, when he walks down the creaky central staircase into a medium close-up (Fig. 9). Whale produces an echo of this shot when, the next morning, Horace comes down and greets the guests; in between, he introduces Saul in a similar fashion.²³ That one can easily miss these repetitions helps to explain why fans of the film find it improves with every viewing.²⁴ Lastly, these three entrances can be contrasted with Rebecca’s introduction, when Whale emphasizes her caustic nature with a staccato cut that punches her body forward as she rushes toward a second-floor balustrade and spits out her first line (Figs. 10-11).



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 8



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 9



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 10. Shot 1.



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 11. Shot 2. "What is it? What do they want?"

The second major axis is through vertical space. Horace's and Saul's entrances traverse this dimension as well, for they bring the characters not only forward but also down. The viewer's eye sweeps this axis as it follows rapid camera movements from the smashed bowl up to Horace's face, down Morgan's body as he points at the floor, and, at the climax, down Saul's body to the knife nestled in the rubble of some broken dishes.²⁵ As with the similar entrances, these darting movements whip up excitement while simultaneously creating visual rhymes that lace the film more tightly together.

*

Get your local gas station to supply you with several thousand of the free auto maps printed up by gasoline companies. Imprint these with the tie-up line: Whee—e—e—e! Shutters banging, doors slamming, mysterious noises, mad doings! . . .

“Exploit the Motorist—Here's How!”
 “‘The Old Dark House’
 Exhibitors' Campaign”

Whale also plans in larger-scale units as he ranges his action in vertical space. The overarching strategy calls to mind ones articulated by Eisenstein, who instructed his students to think dynamically as they utilized both the vertical plane of the screen and the heights of the scenographic space—to map out zones along staircases, for example, wherein they would crisply delineate the individual episodes and the characters' relationships to each other.²⁶ Ellis (1980, pp. 143-44) succinctly and illuminatingly explains Whale's analogous strategy, a pattern of

vertical movement. Horace and Rebecca are introduced as they come *down* the stairs; Philip goes *up* the stairs to find Saul's double bolted door, and then must run *down* to aid Margaret; Philip and Margaret go *up* to Sir Roderick's bedroom; Saul comes *down* in his chilling introduction; and, finally, Saul and Penderel move from the dining room *up* to the first floor landing and then crash *down* during their climactic fight. This up-down movement

parallels the anxiety-comedy dichotomy. Downstairs, the Femms appear as a bizarre collection of eccentrics—odd and amusing, yet harmless. But upstairs lies hidden the family “skeleton in the closet”—the total madness of Saul.²⁷

Narrative space merges with Whale’s vertical plan at moments such as when Roderick tells Margaret and Philip of the harm that might come from—“no, not Morgan, I mean from my eldest son”—and he points up—“Saul” (Fig. 12). We have seen this gesture before, when Rebecca reminds Horace where he will find the lamp (Fig. 13), and when Horace, trying everything he can think of to avoid having to go upstairs to get it, urges Philip, “You’ll find it on the little table at the end of the landing, two floors above” (Fig. 14). As the dramatic arc rises and the tension mounts, the up-and-down movements described by Ellis grow feverish. Margaret races up the stairs and into Philip’s arms while Morgan follows in pursuit; then Philip crowns him with the lamp and down the stairs Morgan rolls. At the climax, Saul dashes up the stairs with a flaming piece of wood, sets the drapes on fire, and then he and Penderel scuffle and over the balustrade they go. More action ensues, concluding when Morgan, weeping, carries the dead Saul back upstairs.

*

Oh, you look, Philip! I can’t see
anything! It’s all a stupid puddle!

Margaret, in *The Old Dark House*,
referring to a soaking road map

Whale deposits surprises behind closed doors—an old man with secrets to tell; a psychopath whose name the others are afraid to utter. Roderick stays put and two characters come to him, while Saul descends to the great hall. Other characters move up and down the staircases and along the suspended hallways, criss-crossing the inky heights as they busily weave the narrative into the vaulting spatial grid. When Whale renders this grid legible, he energizes and articulates the action and gives viewers reason to dread what lies above. But Whale counts on



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 12



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 13



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 14

viewers and characters losing their way in this space as well. A map of the house that is always reliable is less fun than one that can lead to dead ends, puddles and worse places. Whale supplies a map when Horace tells Philip that he'll find the lamp on the little table on the landing two floors above. Later, he takes this map away when Philip and Margaret pass by a gargoyle on one landing (Fig. 15) then, after a cut, ascend to the next landing, where a second gargoyle creates a graphic match with the first which makes the edit look like a jump cut (Fig. 16)—as though the characters have not proceeded to the next level at all but come back to the same one. As in a nightmare, or a house of



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Fig. 15. Shot 1. When the characters ascend from one landing...



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 16. Shot 2. ... and arrive at the next, the second gargoyle takes the place of the one below.

mirrors, the characters seem to be moving but not making progress, walking in place, caught in an unreal loop.

This spatial hiccup is mild, but placing it beside other moments in the film can help us make a case for a cumulative effect. Whale takes one space, a landing, and effectively multiplies it by two. Elsewhere he splinters spaces into fragments in ways that do not conform to standard classical Hollywood editing practices. For example, when Morgan is chasing Margaret, Whale cuts to two extreme close-ups of his face (Figs 17-18). Whale is ready to manipulate *time* in unorthodox ways as well. One such occasion, I suggest, begins when Saul first lays his hand on the banister (see Fig. 4). It stays there unmoving for so long that most viewers, I suspect, forget about him. Then,



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 17. Shot 1.



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 18. Shot 2.

three-and-a-quarter minutes and a lot of hectic dramatic action later, the character resumes his descent. Saul could stand there all night, and easily motivating this choice would be the character's lunatic state. Another way to see it is that Whale places a character and then stops time *in just that spot* while the action continues to unfold outside this frozen pocket of the diegesis. This admittedly unorthodox view of what is happening finds support when we consider Saul's protracted emergence alongside the film's most famous scene.

Margaret needs to change out of her wet things. Rebecca shows her to what Everson (1974, p. 82) describes as her "cluttered, claustrophobic Victorian room." There Rebecca proceeds to taunt and torment Margaret, poking her and telling her that her flesh, "fine stuff," will one day rot, ranting about "laughter and sin," and cackling in a way that reminds us that *ODH* was a Halloween season release. Shooting into a warped mirror, Whale distorts Rebecca's face and increases the apparent number of candles burning in the room. This sequence divides into two sections, in the second of which the fragmentation and distortion effects build on the first. Rebecca exits the room. Margaret opens the window and lets in a roaring wind. There follow six shots of Rebecca, her face distorted, repeating snippets of her previous speech and cackling (Fig. 19). Whale has found a way to make Rebecca even more disturbing, just as, throughout, he has underscored the deficient and deformed natures of the



© Universal Pictures Corporation, 1932

Fig. 19. The first of six shots of Rebecca.

residents of this degenerate household: Morgan, first presented through a sliver of an open door, and later in shots that give us his misshapen face in pieces, lacks a voice; Rebecca, in this scene split into multiple, twisted, shard-like images, is nearly deaf; Roderick can't move; the spindly Horace lacks courage; and Saul, synecdochically introduced as a hand, lacks reason.²⁸ So the scene in Rebecca's bedroom plays into the ongoing characterization of the grotesques inhabiting the household, and further sharpens the contrast between them and the "modern" and "normal" travellers.²⁹ On a more basic level, though, a referential one: in Rebecca's bedroom, what are we seeing?

Are we seeing the traumatized Margaret's mental replay of the events that have just transpired? Several critics view these interpolated shots as subjective.³⁰ I don't find the cues at all clear on this point. It is just as possible that the house, not explicitly a supernatural structure but still a malign one, is hurling these words and images at Margaret for a second time; that the house is doing it to her. Comparing *ODH* to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Ellis (1980, p. 138) writes that "in both works, we have the feeling that the house influences the nature of its inhabitants, that it is somehow 'alive.'" Elsewhere he writes that "like the Usher home, the Femm house seems to possess a kind of intelligence or 'sentience'" (p. 156). All around Margaret, time and space seem momentarily to burst apart. Interspersed with the shots of Rebecca are two brief ones of Morgan, apparently peeping at Margaret. Are these subjective images, Margaret's worst fear, or is Morgan physically present in the scene? Is this a slice of simultaneity tossed into the jumble of discontinuous space and non-linear time that, more than the wind and thunder, sends Margaret screaming from the room? Perhaps what is scariest of all is that there is no way to know for sure.

Conclusion: A return to the fairground

Then, as now, the "attraction" was a term of the fairground, and for Eisenstein and his friend Yutkevich, it primarily represented their favorite fairground attraction, the roller

coaster, or as it was known then in Russia, the American Mountains.

Tom Gunning (2006, pp. 384-85)

The Old Dark House is the ultimate fun park ride.

John T. Soister (1999, p. 142)

Keeping in mind the detour the attraction takes—through Eisenstein—on its way into the literature on early cinema, and from there into the literature on mainstream narrative cinema, can help prime us to notice how “montage fragments” in a horror film like *ODH* work to unify the whole film. But appreciating this film’s organic quality should not prevent us also from noticing its overtly “mechanical” aspects. One can start with the routine quality of the characters: the chorus girl; the blustery and coarse industrialist; the bickering married couple; and Penderel, the disillusioned war veteran who has seen too much.³¹ The characters can seem perfunctory, and even one who disagrees cannot help but find the plot that catches them up to be thoroughly contrived; a reviewer wrote that the characters “have hardly begun to talk before so many wildly melodramatic events occur that there is no time for anyone to think of anything but keeping alive. Thus their individuality is almost entirely wasted, and there is, in fact, nothing but a purely accidental relationship between the characters and the plot.”³² Another referred to the “chorus girl whom one of the young men in the party decides to marry after talking to her for 20 minutes.”³³ We register the mechanical nature of the plot in the discovery that a large enough storm can start Morgan drinking, and that enough drinking can cause him to turn Saul loose. Horace spells out half this recipe for disaster when he cryptically says that a storm might set Morgan going; Roderick fills in the rest: “You see, if Morgan is bad, I, uh, I think he might, uh, open the door.” Pull that switch and you trip that wire, which turns that pulley and opens that door. The machine-like narrative asserts itself even before the travellers set foot in the house, when the thrusting

arm of a landslide, which looks oddly self-propelled, cuts off their retreat and when, seconds later, another one blocks their forward progress. The theme of containment is thus established before Morgan lets them in and shuts the door, when these spring-loaded slabs of mud render the old dark house the only possible next stop for the film's cookie-cutter characters.

This quality of the film turned off some reviewers. One called *ODH* "an angry mechanical wraith to scare children and terrify their elders."³⁴ Another, though, wrote appreciatively that "the creak of the machinery is reduced at times almost to inaudibility, and clutching hands are not introduced simply because they are clutching hands, but have a body behind them" (Scheuer 1932, p. A7). Even when we can hear the creaking loudly, the fun, and Whale's artistry, are never in danger of disappearing. I began this essay by insisting that we put some distance between the attractions in mainstream horror films and the ones in fairgrounds; now I want to shrink this distance by suggesting that arguments over what is "organic" versus what is "mechanical," like ones over what is "theatrical" versus what is "cinematic," can do more mischief than good, since a machine can be—and almost certainly is if we are talking about a real machine and not a metaphor—a well-organized body in which the parts integrate with each other into a smoothly running whole. Roller coasters, Eisenstein's "American Mountains," must be this or people will die and amusement parks will shut down. Good horror films, too, are beautifully engineered contraptions. *ODH* simply makes this more explicit than most, and is perhaps a little more beautiful. Whale's Halloween gift to moviegoers is no less scary because it so lovingly resembles a fun house tricked out with "ghouls" who float down staircases and into onlookers' faces as though moving on hidden rails; "witches" who leap from place to place pecking and shrieking as though jerked about by wires; and a "monster" who swings his fist straight at us through a window and then pulls his arm back inside, where he will no doubt wait, spring wound, until the next unsuspecting ticket holder passes by.

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NOTES

1. I wish to thank the anonymous *Cinémas* readers for their helpful comments on this essay.

2. Elsewhere, Heffernan (2004, p. 25) suggests a more nuanced relationship between attractions and horror film narratives when he describes “the genre’s eruptions of shock and spectacle and the efforts of the narrative to both impel and contain them.”

3. I am calling *Strike* Eisenstein’s first film, even though he made *Glumov’s Diary*, a short film to be screened as part of a theatre production, the previous year (Bordwell 1993, pp. 7-8).

4. In his essay “Eisenstein’s Epistemological Shift,” Bordwell claims that Eisenstein’s approach to film form in the early part of his career emphasizes collision and tension (1975, pp. 34-36, 39), and that later “tension drops out of the concept of montage; now he stresses organicism. . . . The parts of the art work will be arranged not to collide but to commingle; the goal is not friction but fusion, not analysis but synthesis” (p. 41). Whether or not the early films powerfully work toward fusion and synthesis certainly can be debated, as the status of the attraction in Eisenstein’s later cinema has been. James Lastra (1995, p. 164) calls Bordwell’s essay “highly contested.” Ben Brewster (1975, p. 32), in an editorial note introducing the essay, writes: “I would suggest that a comparison between Eisenstein’s earlier and later writings reveals less a contrast than Bordwell argues.” A few years later, Jacques Aumont ([1979] 1987, p. 48) writes that “despite all the apparent abruptness and radicalness of his reversal, Eisenstein does not in fact give up much of the content of the concept of attraction.” Bordwell, in *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, modifies some of the views he set forth in his essay. In the book he writes, echoing Aumont, that “Eisenstein never wholly abandons the concept of attractions” (Bordwell 1993, p. 125), and, of Eisenstein’s theoretical approach to filmmaking, that “in practice, the strategy was not so mechanical as it might seem. A great dynamism is achieved in the development of the circle and water motifs in *Strike*” (p. 268). In an “Annotated List of Principal Essays” on his website, Bordwell calls the original essay “deeply mistaken in many ways, but some writers think I still hold to views expressed here—neglecting my refinement of them in *The Cinema of Eisenstein*” (“Annotated List of Principal Essays,” *David Bordwell’s Website on Cinema*, <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/annotated.php>>). On Bordwell’s essay and this debate, see Kopley 1993, p. 15, n. 4. For a brilliant overview of Eisenstein’s works, including how motifs and other devices unify his films, see Bordwell’s book (1993).

5. By taking this approach, I do not mean to suggest that Eisenstein would like Whale’s film. Writing about German Expressionist cinema (to which, through Paul Leni’s *The Cat and the Canary* [1927], *The Old Dark House* owes a debt), Eisenstein (1996, pp. 197-98) described “the chaos of multiple exposures, dissolve sequences, and intercut images. . . . All these tendencies were knitted together in the famous *Doctor Caligari* (1920), a barbarous celebration of the self-destruction of the healthy, humane basis of art, a common grave for healthy cinematic impulses, a combination of the dumb hysteria of action, an assortment of painted canvasses, daubed sets, made-up faces, and monstrous chimeras, unnatural breaks and actions.”

6. “Reviews of the Week,” *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 September 1932. Another called it “one of the most gratifying of the whole lot of the horror school” (J.C.M., “The Current Cinema: Creeps and Shudders [Rev. of *ODH*],” *New Yorker*, 5 November 1932, p. 77), while another found “by no means so many ragged edges as are usual in such adaptations” ([Rev. of *ODH*], *London Times*, 24 October 1932, p. 12).

7. For Everson, the film is “the apotheosis of the ‘Old House’ chillers” (1974, p. 81). Another calls it “the classic of the species” (Gifford 1973, p. 188).

8. An ad for *ODH* in the *Motion Picture Herald* emphasized Morgan's similarity to the monster when it showed, in five images, the monster transforming into the butler (1932, p. 49). Paul M. Jenson (1996, p. 31) highlights another similarity when he notes, at the climax of *ODH*, "a situation evocative of *Frankenstein's* climax—man and 'monster' fight on a high place, beside a railing, for possession of a smoldering torch."

9. "Old Dark House," *Variety*, 1 November 1932 (p. 12). Another wrote that "unlike 'Dracula' or 'Frankenstein,' the tragedy of its drama is always threatening but never eventuates" (McCarthy 1932, p. 52).

10. [Rev. of *ODH*], *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 1932 (p. 3).

11. A reviewer wrote that "a horror picture minus clutching hands, sliding panels or laboratory contraptions may be too far removed from the ordinary to suit the majority, but this must certainly rate as one of the best in the eyes of the discriminating" (Lusk 1933, p. 60).

12. For example: "Messrs. Whale and Karloff have progressed since the day when they dabbled in the crude though diverting sensations of *Frankenstein*. There is a new and welcome restraint about their work" (*Film Weekly*, 21 Oct. 1932, quoted in Gifford 1973, p. 187); "There is a smoothness here that the *Frankenstein* picture didn't have. . . . The movie people have bothered with this one, given it polish" (J.C.M., "The Current Cinema: Creeps and Shudders [Rev. of *ODH*]," *New Yorker*, 5 November 1932, p. 77); "Whale, improving as a director, reveals a sense of directorial pace for the first time" (Scheuer 1932, p. A7).

13. An initial reviewer wrote that *ODH* "may not have as complete a story as 'Frankenstein'" (Hall 1932, p. 22). Another wrote that the "impossible story possibly induced Whale to concentrate on the various characters" ("Old Dark House," *Variety*, 21 October 1932). A later writer refers to the "paper-thin narrative" (Pym 1979, p. 159).

14. Ads also singled Karloff out. One announces "KARLOFF the mysterious in OLD DARK HOUSE" (*Saturday Evening Post*, 5 November 1932, p. 54). *Variety* found that "Karloff, outside of getting drunk and grunting a few times, has little to do" ("Old Dark House," *Variety*, 21 October 1932). Also, if the cast of the film looks to us like a powerhouse of major talent, James Curtis (1998, p. 173) points out that "most were unknown to American audiences at the time."

15. Others who find the film theatrical include Ellis 1980 (p. 144), Mank 1988 (p. 48) and Lugowski 2007 (p. 80).

16. See Bordwell 1993 (pp. 141-55).

17. "Old Dark House," *Variety*, 1 November 1932, p. 12. Another wrote that Margaret's "evening gown for such a scene is perhaps a trifle out of place" (Hall 1932, p. 22).

18. "'The Old Dark House' Exhibitors' Campaign," New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

19. James Curtis, in his commentary on the Kino DVD release of the film (1999), notes this double function of the tossing of the flowers.

20. The film's Biblical allusions are discussed in Ellis 1980 (pp. 152-53, 161), Jensen 1996 (p. 31) and Benshoff 1997 (p. 45).

21. We see this again when Horace tells Morgan to answer the door. This pattern is discussed in Ellis 1980 (pp. 151-52).

22. How the film equivocates and misleads on the question of the worst threat in the house is discussed in Ellis 1980 (p. 140).

23. At one point, on this staircase—which, Barry Curtis (2008, p. 60) notes, "mediates the distribution of space, connecting public to private, evident to secret"—Whale

makes this character's duplicity plain when Saul hits the bottom step and then immediately retreats to a higher one.

24. Examples of this claim are in Everson 1974 (p. 81), Senn 1996 (p. 120), Brunas, Brunas and Weaver 1990 (p. 44) and Whittemore and Cecchetti 1976 (p. 277).

25. Also, in the stable, the camera moves up from Penderel's shoes outside the car to him and Gladys seated inside.

26. See, for example, Nizhny 1962 (pp. 17 and 94) and Bordwell 1993 (p. 144).

27. Another writer describes Whale moving "his actors along and about the remote corners and landings of the old dark house as a master at multi-dimensional chess would control his pieces" (Soister 1999, p. 140).

28. Others who see the residents as throwbacks include Don Whittemore and Philip Alan Cecchetti (1976, p. 278), who call them "decrepit remnants of Victorian England."

29. At one point in the bedroom scene, Margaret's face is cracked and distorted in two warped mirrors, suggesting that the threat represented by the household is, at this moment, very close. Also, in contrast to the difference I see asserted between the guests and their hosts, Benshoff (1997, p. 43), in his queer reading of the film, finds the travellers "as eccentric as the denizens of the house."

30. Mank 1988 (p. 45); Curtis 1998 (p. 177); Brunas, Brunas and Weaver 1990 (p. 45).

31. One, who found the characters redeemed by the performances, wrote: "These figures are not so wholly conventional, at any rate in the hands of such skilful [sic] actors" ([Rev. of *ODH*], *London Times*, 24 October 1932, p. 12).

32. [Rev. of *ODH*], *London Times*, 24 October 1932 (p. 12).

33. [Rev. of *ODH*], *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 1932 (p. 3).

34. [Rev. of *ODH*], *Time*, 7 November 1932 (p. 39).

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RÉSUMÉ

The Old Dark House et l'espace de l'attraction

Robert Spadoni

Certains auteurs ont utilisé le concept de « cinéma des attractions », issu des études sur le cinéma des premiers temps, pour affirmer que les films d'horreur sacrifient l'intégrité narrative au profit de chocs spectaculaires et d'éléments susceptibles de provoquer des peurs subites. Toutefois, en examinant l'histoire de ce concept, on constate que Sergei Eisenstein a souvent insisté sur la capacité de l'attraction à unifier un film de manière particulièrement efficace. Dans le film d'horreur *The Old Dark House* (1932), les claquements de porte, les roulements de tonnerre, les carreaux qui volent en éclats ainsi que le menaçant majordome muet, bien qu'effrayants, participent aussi de la stratégie de James Whale. Celui-ci sème son film de divers motifs et répétitions, afin de créer une œuvre qui gagne en puissance à chaque visionnement. Malgré sa mince trame narrative, ses personnages typés et son histoire, déjà convenue en 1932, de personnages prisonniers d'une vieille et sinistre maison,

le film parvient à garder sa cohésion grâce à un procédé complexe. De façon très calculée, Whale introduit les attractions au sein d'un réseau qui coïncide avec les différents niveaux du décor. Les personnages montent et descendent les escaliers grinçants, longent les corridors suspendus, se pourchassent et se chamaillent, révélant ou cachant certains secrets. Les espaces scénographique et narratif s'entremêlent ainsi en une unité serrée, où scintille une pléiade de chocs pareils à ceux des maisons hantées. Les accessoires, tels les lampes et les couteaux, circulent également dans ces espaces, traçant des motifs qui font sursauter le spectateur tout en donnant au film sa rigoureuse et élégante cohérence.