William Castle's *The Old Dark House* (1963)

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During the late-Fifties and early-Sixties, Hammer Films entered its acclaimed period of Gothic films, mostly loose remakes of Universal properties, that defined the British company as the leading exporter of horror films, producing a series of films that became immediate box-office hits around the world. Films like *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) *Dracula* (aka *The Horror of Dracula* – 1958), and *The Mummy* (1959), became instant classics, and fundamentally shaped the nature of the horror genre in Western Europe and the United States. Many of Hammer's films are even seen to rival the revered originals, especially *Dracula*. Hammer's *The Old Dark House* (1963), however, is not considered one of those films, despite the fact it was co-produced and directed by William Castle, a leading figure in horror from the States.

There is a wide agreement among fans and critics that Castle/Hammer's *The Old Dark House* is not a very good film, and an even worse remake. Hammer was given the keys to the Gothic vaults by Universal – all of the classic Gothic characters that defined the studio in the Thirties and Forties were up for grabs for remaking and adaptation. In 1932, James Whale

directed *The Old Dark House*, an adaptation of English author J. B. Priestley's *Benighted* (1927) (titled *The Old Dark House* in the US). Though not well-received at the time, Whale's film was, by the Sixties, considered a Gothic classic. Unlike Dracula, Frankenstein, and Kharis, *The Old Dark House* was not part of that package offered to Hammer. Universal had lost the rights to *Benighted* in 1957, and the film was locked away and thought lost until it was rediscovered in 1968 (Kemp 2018: 25).

The Hammer/Castle version was not officially a remake or adaptation of any Universal property in the same way that Hammer's *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (legally) were. In true Castle style, it was an attempt to exploit the lapsed rights of the original whilst drawing on the reputation and legend of the '32 film. Yet, even given the fact that the original film was lost (or more accurately, withdrawn), Castle's "remake" is so glaringly stark in its divergencies from both the film and the novel; aside from a few familiar names and the conceit of a mad family in an old dark house, the stories are almost entirely different. Many take this as a blight on Castle's version. Moreover, were the film executed in Hammer's Gothic house-style – the vibrant hues, gushing blood, a booming score, and erotica that was perfected in subsequent sequels – these divergencies may have been forgiven (in the same way that *Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, stray far from most screen, stage, and novel versions). For many, *The Old Dark House* never really feels like a Hammer film. In many ways, as Jonathan Rigby notes, it feels a lot more like an Ealing comedy (sharing many of the same actors known for comedy), or even, dare I say, a film from the lowbrow *Carry On* series; Fenella Fielding, who played Morgana, would go on to star in *Carry On Screaming* (1966), a spoof of Hammer horrors (Rigby 2018). For many, with the benefit of hindsight, *The Old Dark House* feels somewhat out of place in Hammer's Sixties line-up.

To call Castle/Hammer's *The Old Dark House* a remake is somewhat misleading, and this is clear when the ways in which the film was mediated is considered. Castle's film is not

really sold as a remake of the Whale original, but as more of an adaptation of Priestley's *Benighted*; the US trailer and theatrical poster state explicitly that the film is based on Priestley's novel. This was also how the film was discussed in the trade press, with *Boxoffice* reporting that Castle was signed on to film 'J. B. Priestley's novel', as opposed to a new version of the lost 1932 film (*Boxoffice* a1962: SW-2). It is perhaps strange that Priestley's name is so prominent in the marketing of the film in the United States, given that by the Sixties, his strong leftwing views were well known and often brought him into conflict with the British government (his play, *An Inspector Calls*, was an explicit call for socialism that saw its first performance in Moscow in 1945).

It is most likely that Priestley's name was intended to bring a greater sense of literary prestige to the production, more so than signal the content of the film, whilst also connecting with a longer tradition of Gothic horror that many associated with Hammer. Due to the long presence of Priestley on English high school curriculums, it is often forgotten now that Priestley was seen as a horror-fantasy author; many of his works include ghosts, psychological horror and even time travel, all of which are used to further social messages. *Benighted* was considered a psychological Gothic classic, with the marketing for *The Old Dark House* calling it a 'Classic Novel of Suspense'. Castle and Hammer were clearly attempted to draw on Priestley's associations with psychological Gothic horror, which had witnessed a major revival in American and British cinema, one that was also lucrative. Psychological Gothics were able to skirt the fine line between lowbrow trash for youngsters and more mature middle-class tastes. The early Sixties, for many, marked a turning point in the horror genre towards more mature, psychological narratives, with the horror emerging from a disturbed psyche, where repressed traumas bubble to the surface and erupt into violence. *Psycho* (1960) and *Peeping Tom* (1960) are often seen to mark this shift, but this is misleading; as Mark Jancovich and others show,

Psycho developed out of themes already at work in the horror film in America and Europe as early as the 1940s (Jancovich 1996).

These broader generic contexts of *The Old Dark House*'s release often go overlooked – or at least, *The Old Dark House* finds itself excluded from horror canons due to its heavy emphasis on comedy. Moreover, the film is so frequently viewed in the contexts of the original film (as a remake) that its connections to contemporary psychological Gothic horror are discussed by few (see Steffan Hantke 2018). William Castle was already working with psychological themes in his horror films from the Fifties. *The Old Dark House* was actually released in the States on a double-bill with Hammer's *Maniac* (1963), which *Boxoffice* called 'comparable [to] Alfred Hitchcock' (*Boxoffice* 1963: a11). *Maniac* was part of Hammer's tilt towards cheaper black and white psychological horror films in the vein of the French film, *Les Diaboliques* (1955), written and directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot (a personal friend of Jean-Paul Sartre), the film which inspired William Castle to get into horror film production in the first place and defined the trajectory of his career towards his production of *Rosemary's Baby* (Castle 1976: 133).

In the US, Hammer was associated with black and white psychological horror as much as it was with its colour Gothic chillers. A collaboration between Hammer and Castle was logical, given that, according to Heffernan, the 'Castle aesthetic fit in well with Hammer's then-current cycle of black-and-white psychological thrillers' (Heffernan 2004: 184). Castle's attachment to *The Old Dark House* was even announced while on tour in France promoting his psychological horror film, *Homicidal* (1961) (*Boxoffice* a1962: SW-2). It was also initially reported that Gothic writer, Ray Russell (strangely credited as the script writer for *Psycho* (1960)), was to write the script – Russell was the former fiction editor of *Playboy* (itself a hotbed of existential and psychological debate) and wrote the script for the William Castle Gothic horror film, *Mr Sardonicus* (1961) – though this (unfortunately) did not transpire, with

writing duties instead going to Robert Dillon (*Boxoffice* b1962: 17; Rigby 2018). Nonetheless, the attempted associations with psychological horror are clear.

Psychological horror also drew on the ideas that had become significant in the postwar years, which saw increasing focus on the minds of ordinary people, though psychology was not solely defined by Freudian psychoanalysis. For instance, in America during the early-Sixties, psychology was often tied up with other ideas, such as existentialism. Psychological problems were framed as existential issues; psychological conflict was not always seen as purely internalized (repression) but as resulting from interpersonal conflict in the world, as psychological battles for domination and subjugation against others (which gave meaning to Sartre's assertion that "Hell is other people"). There was a sense that the subjective world – the processes by which the individual constructs and interprets their world and their identity – could come under strain, or under assault, as others seek to define and shape one's identity and world in a psychological struggle, imposing their own interpretations and meanings on them. Alienation as a psycho-existential idea referred to this sense of being unable to meaningfully impact one's place in the world.

These battles for psychological dominance were often played out in the Gothic, where disturbed characters frequently create closed, psychic worlds – frequently built on irrational footings – in order to keep them safe from the "real", rational world which undermines their sense of identity; hence the trope of the unwelcome traveller who brings a slice of the outside world in, resulting in the destruction of the closed psychic world. By the late-Fifties, these themes were increasingly raised in psychological horror films; psychological conflicts and manipulation between individuals (and world) were far more common themes in this period than the explosion of repressed horror that we (arguably) see in *Psycho*. Castle's *The Old Dark House* is a far more interesting film when read within these contexts.

Priestley's *Benighted* has been read by later critics as delving into existential problems, such as dread and the sense of human insignificance in a larger hostile universe (Grey 2013: vii). Both the Femm family and the benighted travellers (several of whom are First World War veterans) frequently reference storm that surrounds them as a sign of the end of the world. Furthermore, in response to the horrors of the outside world, the Femms have locked themselves away, creating their own irrational universe. This sense of existential dread prompting a descent into madness, psychological conflict, and alternate universes is a core theme of the novel that arguably recurs in the 1963 adaptation. In the film, the Femms have built up their own psychic world around the stabilizing legend of their inheritance. The Femms cling to this world that they have constructed, a world that is for them meaningful. The act of gathering in Femm Hall at midnight orders and regulates their lives – it provides a sense of meaning and purpose. However, this world is coming under strain, even before the arrival of Tom Penderel.

There are various instances where the possibility of the world coming to an end is acknowledged, causing anxiety. The most explicit is Potiphar's ark, which makes it clear that he is preparing for the end of his world. When discussing her knitting, Agatha suggests that if she stops, the world might also stop; connecting with the idea that if a Femm stops with the midnight ritual, their whole world may also stop. The other Femms worry about the end of their personal world. Roderick is concerned what Tom's arrival means for his inheritance; Morgan fears that Morgana will be taken away from him; Casper and Jasper (rightly) fear that they are the targets of the murderer, and that their Femm hall ritual restricts their night life; Cecily seeks to physically destroy and escape the world of the Femms. Cecily takes on the arsonist role from the novel and film – the psychologically unhinged figure whose identity is to some extent hidden from the protagonist. Rather than being simply mad, the irrational world she is forced

to inhabit, and the obsession of her relatives with wealth (her condition of being-with-others, others who have determined her reality for her), pushes her to murder and destruction.

Femm Hall becomes the site of intersubjective struggle, as the Femms seek to reaffirm their increasingly unstable worldview, the organizing principles that govern their existence. Tom is an unwitting actor in this intersubjective drama; he is the hapless voice of reason that stumbles into an irrational psychodrama and family conflict. He serves to further undermine the stability of the Femm world by pointing out just how irrational everything is, with their refusal (or unwillingness) to accept this causing greater anxiety for him. Tom is placed at risk of collapsing into madness, particularly as the others continually gaslight him or try to convince him that everything is normal; Tom risks becoming trapped in this irrational Femm world (though he eventually, by accident, becomes its master). Tom Penderel is apparently a very distant American relation, an illegitimate heir of Morgan the Pirate, suggesting that the purity of family (or class) is tainted; his entry into Femm hall is both the invasion of an Outsider from without (America/modernity/class) and from within (the family). Tom's arrival brings an existential threat – not only is he arguably entitled to the inheritance, thus potentially transferring the estate away from the pure Femm lineage, but he also represents that entry of the rational (American) world into the irrational, eccentric world of the Femms; indeed, at the end of the film, the American stars and stripes fly high over Femm hall.

When viewed as a psychological horror film, Hammer and Castle's *The Old Dark House* can be seen to somewhat faithfully adapt some of the themes at work in Priestley, despite abandoning much else. There was an attempt to tap into the psychological effects of existential dread – how do we respond when we believe our world could be coming to an end? The focus on *The Old Dark House* as a remake of the original Universal film has led to the 1963 version being perhaps unfairly dismissed, while also ensuring that the cultural contexts that regulated the potential meanings of the 1963 film are also overlooked. *The Old Dark House* was produced

at the height of both Castle and Hammer's association with psychological horror in the early Sixties where ideas about psychology and existentialism frequently overlapped and was to a certain extend sold accordingly. The film was signalled as a psychological horror film, though one that was played more comedically – indeed, while William Castle was seen as a major figure in psychological horror, his films were also received as comedies, or black comedies. *The Old Dark House*'s status as a "poor" remake should not overshadow its place in the wider cultural history of psychological horror the value of critical investigation into its interesting mediation on wider themes at work in the genre.

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