

On-screen and Off-screen Monstrosity of Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff

Outi Hakola
University of Turku, outi.hakola@utu.fi

Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff are known for their roles as monsters. Whereas stars often cross genres, these two actors became genre-specific characters (See e.g. Britton 1991, 202). I will concentrate on their fascinating and “horrifying” stardom, based on their most famous performances as monsters: Lugosi’s *Dracula* and Karloff’s *Frankenstein*. The central focus is on the relationship between horror genre of the 1930s and its two horror stars.

Hollywood stars are the visible connection between audiences and authors, they have personalities both on-screen and off-screen. Stars represent ideals, norms and expectations of the film industry and audience. Therefore stars usually become known for the roles with which the audience finds it easy to identify. However, monstrosity is rarely popular for providing a place for identification and even more rarely it is considered normative or ideal for exemplar. Therefore the questions of monster stardom and men behind these 1930s star images are interesting. On the one hand they became stars because they fitted these monster role expectations and on the other hand the generic expectations moulded their stardom enormously.

In the horror genre, monsters are central because their otherness generates both fascination and threat. In my paper I argue that the combination of otherness and safety of the monster images of Lugosi and Karloff made them stars, not only antagonists of the stories. Their on-screen and off-screen personalities did not defy the white middle class Hollywood too much and they could be used to promote films and to be spokesmen for the Universal studios. But at the same time they did challenge the norm of the stardom of the 1930s in a way that they were admitted the role of the monster instead of the hero. In this paper I will look into this combination and contradiction of stardom and monstrosity, of norms and otherness with the help of the on-screen and off-screen stardom of Lugosi and Karloff.

Generic Expectations of Classic Horror

The period from 1930 to 1960 is the classical era of the Hollywood production. These decades were controlled by studios that had developed by the 1930s. The Classical Hollywood can be seen as a unified mode of film practice with coherent production and aesthetic systems (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1996, xiv). Therefore the classical Hollywood was a unique material, technical, aesthetic, social, ethical and political entity. Murray Smith (1999, 34) describes the classical Hollywood as a regulated and balanced narration of stories, production of films and addressing these films to the homogeneous audience.

In the 1930s, both genre and stars were crucial pillars supporting the classical Hollywood narration. According to Elizabeth Cowie, genre and stardom served the classical narration by covering the plot holes, which the audience could fill with their generic knowledge and star recognition. The filmmakers were able to concentrate on the essential narration instead of the causal structure of the story. (Cowie 1999, 183-185.) The Hollywood star system that was developed during the 1910s and 1920s was effectively used for the marketing of films as well (Dyer 1986, 11, 19). Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff served the Universal studio and starred their greatest horror

films of the decade. Not only did they become monster stars to their own generation but to the following ones as well.

Horror was one of the central genres of the 1930s. The years from 1931 to 1936 are designated as the classic or golden horror era of the American cinema and during these years many films that later defined the genre were made. Especially the Universal studio was active in the field and they filmed several legendary monsters, such as Dracula and Frankenstein.

The horror boom can be explained with practical and cultural reasons. The development of sound film made distinctive horrifying and ill-omened sound effects possible. The technical improvements of edition, picture quality, effects, light technique and makeup encouraged moody use of the *mise-en-scene*. (See e.g. Tudor 1989, 28; Balio 1995, 141, 298.) The horror stories were waiting for to be filmed and the cultural mentality of the Depression era offered a responsive context. Several horror researches, such as Noël Carroll (1990, 208), have argued that horror appealed to the popular taste because it objected the social order – with the help of the monsters. The films narrated alienation and the viewers could identify with the feelings of exclusion. The monsters represented otherness and were easily compared to the depressed people. (See for example Tudor 1989, 28; Skal 1993, 114-116.) Therefore it is no surprise that the stars of the 1930s horror genre performed the roles of monsters.

Monster Stardom

Monsters are key characters in the horror films. They specify otherwise quite formulaic stories. Yvonne Leffler (2000, 46) argues that the classical horror films emphasize their monsters both thematically and visually. A visible consequence of the monster centrality is the stardom of Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff.

Their stardom is interesting while compared with the stardom of other genres. Stars often play heroes and they become related to the ideal of humanity (See Dyer 1986, 22). This way the viewers are offered a positive identification position. Consequently the viewers of horror usually identify with the hero instead of the monster. Even though the position of monster is available it is rarely or temporarily taken. (Carroll 1990, 16-17; Leffler 2000, 163-174.) On the screen Lugosi and Karloff were related to monstrousness and threat instead of heroism. Whereas stardom is supposed to be desirable, the monstrousness is not. However, these two actors became famous for their monster roles.

Instead of heroism, monsters bring out some other desirable elements of stardom. For example monstrousness is unique and separated from ordinariness, it is both unknown and fascinating. It alludes to authority, power, sexuality, and masculinity. In horror films the monsters are always unique and extraordinary whereas the heroes are one of us, everyday figures. Still, not every monster actor becomes famous.

In the case of both Lugosi and Karloff the stardom was caused by the combination of on-screen and off-screen associations. Both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* were huge box-office successes and both monster characters were fascinating, but perhaps for different reasons. Dracula was aristocratic and seductive character, Frankenstein was clumsy, unintentionally horrifying, misunderstood character. Therefore Lugosi's Dracula fascinated the viewer with authoritative figure and Karloff's Frankenstein with a sympathetic appearance.

These monster roles captivated the audience, but at the same time they caused interesting dilemma concerning the stardom. Classical Hollywood and classical stardom was based on norms and homogeneity. For example Daniel Bernardi highlights the loyalty to acknowledged norms in the case of whiteness and gender expectations. These norms cut across studio systems, audiences, authors, genres and studios as well as stardom. (Bernardi 2001, xix.) Especially the roles of heroes were strictly bound to the normative expectations, but among the marginal roles variation could take place, for example occasional use of black actors. Accordingly, monster roles were a possible place for such marginal and carnival roles. Both Lugosi and Karloff star images were based on the advantage of recognisable and still slightly twisted star images and personalities. Lugosi's and Karloff's stardom can be explained in many ways, I will focus on three reasons: their gender, their age and their cultural otherness.

Firstly, the relationship between monsters and gender is important because it supports the normative expectations of the male star. Both Dracula and Frankenstein were powerful male figures. Dracula's seductiveness was emphatically masculine. Dracula beat the male victims with physical power whereas the female victims were seduced and they merely wanted to devote themselves to Dracula. At least during the 1930s film Dracula was quite a heterosexual figure, physically more powerful and sexually more seductive than other men and adored among the women.

However, Frankenstein played with quite different attributes. Sexually seductiveness has never been this monster's key characteristic. Instead, the grotesque figure was physically enormous and powerful in a way that seemed

to exceed all others. The other characters of the film seemed to be able to concentrate only on this physical side, but the viewers could also relate to more sympathetic side of the monster. While Dracula's authoritative figure was admired and feared, Frankenstein was sympathetic and physically overwhelming at the same time.

Both of the figures that brought fame for Lugosi and Karloff were masculine and therefore positively connected to stardom. However, the gender identities characteristic of Hollywood films are always ambiguity, as Simon Dixon underlines. He claims that "exhibitionism in Hollywood films is generally associated with femininity" and therefore the male actors are in need of solid masculinity to balance their superficial Hollywood acting. (Dixon 2003, 89.) In horror, the female victims of the 1930s horror represented home, normality, and helplessness and they needed protection. The male monsters' existence and sexuality threatened especially the females. The hero had to save the female and win the beast, but even after the monster had been beaten, it represented sexual or physical masculinity in a flattering way for the monster stars. It could be said that monstrosity even highlighted the positive masculinity for horror stars and exhibitionism became part of the monster image.

Another factor that supported the monster stardom of Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff was age. In Hollywood the age of the star is more restricting factor for female actresses than for male. Especially in the case of monstrosity, the relatively old age seemed to bring "natural" authority to the figures. Lugosi and Karloff were both quite old when they became stars. Béla Lugosi was 49 and Boris Karloff was 43. This gave them an image of power that a juvenile monster would have lacked. They both had long acting careers behind them. Lugosi had performed mostly in the theatre. He was chosen to play Dracula in the film adaptation because of his role as the count on stage. Karloff had acted in several films, but was still quite unknown actor before *Frankenstein*. Actually, in the opening lines of *Frankenstein* his name is even replaced by a question mark. Because their earlier careers were unknown to the wide audience they were more easily connected to their famous roles as monsters.

However, perhaps the most important factor for monster stardom was otherness. The monster characters represent otherness, us versus them. Both Lugosi and Karloff represented otherness in a way that was close enough to the norm of stardom, but marginal enough to place them in monster roles. Interestingly both Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff were foreigners in Hollywood: they did not represent Americans, but Europeans – something quite familiar especially in Hollywood in those years and still somewhat different.

Karloff was British and Lugosi Hungarian. Boris Karloff used his foreignness by design as a part of his professional role. He was born in London and was originally named William Pratt. After he moved to Canada at the age of 22 and started acting he artificially added the exoticism to his image by changing his name to Boris Karloff. This name corresponded to his dark skin he had inherited from his father's East Indian background.

In the case of Béla Lugosi (originally Béla Ferenc Denzö Blaskó) otherness categorized and to some extent isolated him. His East European foreignness became a sign for monstrousness and Lugosi himself became a living icon for the count Dracula. Ironically he was even born near the western border of Transylvania. He started his acting career in Hungary, but an unbalanced political situation forced him to immigrate to the United States in 1920. He started to work as an actor, but his exoticism became a barrier. He hardly learnt to speak fluent English and he memorized many of his lines phonetically without deep understanding of the meaning. The otherness of Lugosi was a rather forced position when compared to Karloff.

Limitations of Star Images

The careers of Lugosi and Karloff are both similar and different. They both sought success and fame that they found quite late and through monster roles. Each these men became stars because of one horror film. Béla Lugosi interpreted Dracula, the lord of vampires in Tod Browning's film in 1931. Later in the same year Karloff played Frankenstein in James Whale's film. These men gave face to the nowadays well-known monsters and their interpretations still influence the cinematic images of these monsters. These roles made them stars, but categorized them as well. Even if they tried – and they did try – they could not break out from monstrosity, especially in the case of Lugosi. The stardom came with a price: they were forced to stand for certain genre, to represent it and to market it. This limited their possibilities to widen their appearances in different film types.

The actors recognized that they had been typed. Béla Lugosi commented "Where once I had been the master of my professional destinies, with a repertoire embracing all kinds and types of men, from Romeo to the classics of Ibsen and Rostand, I became Dracula's puppet. The shadowy figure of Dracula, more than any casting office, dictated the kind of parts I played. - - Never has a role so influenced and dominated an actor's personal life and private fortunes." (Pickard 1989)

Boris Karloff did not react as directly to the typecasting. He said “One always hears of actors complaining of being typed - if he’s young, he’s typed as a juvenile; if he’s handsome, he’s typed as a leading man. I was lucky. Whereas boot makers have to spend millions to establish a trademark, I was handed a trademark free of charge. When an actor gets in a position to select his own roles, he’s in big trouble, for he never knows what he can do best. I’m sure I’d be damn good as little Lord Fauntleroy, but who would pay ten cents to see it?” (International Movie Database)

The horror boom of the 1930s guaranteed viewers for several films and therefore roles for the monsters. After the success of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* Lugosi and Karloff performed in several horror films and occasionally they starred some film together, *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) for example. At the later half of the decade the production of horror decreased. The genre did not renew itself and the audience got bored with the same old stories. (See for example Alanen & Alanen 1985, 69.) From there onwards the careers of these monster stars became distinctively different. As Smith Gene (1998) writes “Karloff could generate to new types of roles upon occasion, taking off his thickly laid-on makeup and persona, but Lugosi never, having no masking and no voice other than his own. He was hopelessly trapped.”

The financial problems forced the actors to accept every offered role. Karloff gained several roles in different genres and in television series. During his career he performed over 200 roles even though his horror roles are still best known. Karloff died at the age of 81 and he acted almost until the end. On the other hand, Béla Lugosi ended up playing in different B-films. He was often used for the publicity reasons instead of his acting skills. He rarely achieved other roles than monsters. During the years he acted in around 100 films, but only a few of them are remembered nowadays. Though his last film *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is famous, but it is remembered for questionable reasons; at the age of 73 Lugosi died during the shooting of the film which has a cult reputation of the worst film ever.

The differences in these two star images can be analyzed with Richard Dyer’s (1986, 68) classification of media texts that shape the stardom, such as promotion, publicity, films and criticism. Especially the acts as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* defined something in Lugosi’s and Karloff’s star images.

Finnish film historian Peter von Bagh writes that Boris Karloff interpreted *Frankenstein* as a tragic and sympathetic character in such a way that a viewer mourns the disposal of the monster. In contrast Béla Lugosi’s *Dracula* was not even meant to be sympathetic, instead this monster count’s fascination derives from evil egoism. (Bagh 1998, 169) Respectively the sympathetic characterization followed Karloff and aristocratic egoism followed Lugosi.

For example Rafferty (2006) defines Karloff as “the scary-but-sympathetic”, his eyes as “sensitive” and voice as “soft and sonorous”. Karloff played many other monsters as well. For example the mummy was not as humane as *Frankenstein*, but the idea of scary but sympathetic monster was supported by the promotion and the publicity material as well. Even though Karloff was promoted as a monster star at publicity he appeared quite distinct from his roles. Karloff participated in fund raisings for children and performed charity. He became known as mild-mannered, quiet, bookish and friendly gentleman. (MacMillan International Film Encyclopedia 2001, 724; International Movie Database.)

Béla Lugosi was more bounded to his role as *Dracula*. His European background with rumors of duels with romantic rivals in Hungary connoted him to aristocracy that fitted the role of the evil count. (Cashill 2003, 48.) He lived a high-profile life, ran large cars, and wore elegant clothes. As Gene Smith (1998) describes “Lugosi lived in high fashion – the financial supporter of soccer teams remindful of the old country, the softest for anyone asking for money. With his wives, of whom in time there was five, he was dictatorial and jealous, the image of European aristocrat and autocrat.”

However, his lavish style of living and decreasing number of roles he managed to achieve forced him to do anything the studio wanted in order to pay the bills. (Pickard 1989.) The promotion was quite different than Karloff’s and Lugosi had to allow the vampire image to overwhelm him. As it is described in MacMillan International Film Encyclopedia (2001, 853), “He began giving interviews while lying in a coffin, was once seen at a Hollywood premiere accompanied by a gorilla, and in his later films played parodies of himself.”

As Cashill (2003, 48) writes, the film *Dracula* “should have been called *Shadow of the Vampire*, so thoroughly was the actor dominated by his singular portrayal.” Lugosi lived with this shadow over 25 years. For example, one of his fans, Hope Lininger, had decided that some day she would marry the count *Dracula*. While Lugosi was hospitalized for drug addiction, they started a correspondence and later married. A year after Lugosi died and he was even buried in his *Dracula* cape. (Pickard 1989.) The shadow of the vampire followed him to the grave.

Endnote: Lugosi and Karloff Today

I would like to conclude that the generic expectations of monster roles influenced both the careers and the star images of Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff. On-screen these two actors were iconic monsters and off-screen they were rivals fighting for the same roles. In the end Karloff managed to work his way through the hard places better and he gained more money and appreciation than Lugosi.

Ironically, when Universal released a couple years ago a DVD box with the films these actors made together the box was marketed as “The Béla Lugosi Collection”. This particular marketing strategy is based on Lugosi’s interpretation of Dracula and on this vital image in the popular culture’s memory. Therefore, the acting skills of these stars may not be crucially important today, whereas the iconic significance of both Dracula and Frankenstein is highlighted. This brings out even more clearly how Lugosi became categorized by only one genre, horror genre. His name is so strongly associated with the vampires and horror that he is an exemplary marketing method for horror even after his death. However, Karloff never became free either from the horror stigma. New generations passionately relate these actors, these men to their roles as Dracula and Frankenstein. Monstrosity continues to be part of their stardom images.

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Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:

History of Stardom Reconsidered. Edited by Kari Kallioniemi, Kimi Kärki, Janne Mäkelä and Hannu Salmi. Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2007. (Available as an eBook at <http://iipc.utu.fi/reconsidered/>)