

Thrills Untapped: Neglected Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Films, 1928-1936



Michael Pitts*

Michael R. Pitts. *Thrills Untapped: Neglected Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Films, 1928-1936*. McFarland, 2019. Paperback, 348 pg. \$49.95. ISBN 978147667351-6.

** Editor's Note: The author of this review is not the same person as the author of the book under review.*

THRILLS Untapped draws attention to serials, documentaries, and sound era films widely overlooked in current scholarship and in this way contributes significantly to science fiction film studies. Choosing to omit evaluations of largely celebrated works such as *Dracula* (1931) and *The Mummy* (1932), Michael R. Pitts instead examines those lesser known works likely to produce new, fruitful research into early genre films of the sound era. His research therefore spans the beginning of the sound era, 1928, to the year in which the British film ban went into effect, restricting the production of horror films, 1936. As Pitts states, the goal of his volume “is to chronicle these mostly ignored movies, providing the exposure they so rightfully deserve” (1). In presenting to his audience in-depth analyses of nearly 150 mostly forgotten films spanning the horror, science fiction, and fantasy genres, he provides an invaluable resource for researchers at the intersection of film studies and science fiction studies.

A particular strength of *Thrills Untapped* is the expansive quality of its analyses, which move beyond simple summations and evaluations of these films. While detailing the salient elements of each film’s plot, for example, this collection presents invaluable extratextual information, including the cultural context within which each film was produced, important details related to its production, the origins of the cinematic project, its place within larger trends of the time, and popular and critical evaluations of it upon its release. In citing, for example, a review from the *Philadelphia Exhibitor* published soon after the release of the film upon which it focuses, *The Mystery of the Marie Celeste* (1935), Pitts both emphasizes the

technical, editing problems of the movie and presents the response of critics at the time to these weaknesses. The film review states, “this is pretty poor. The actors are positively hammy; the recording, the photography are awful; [Bela] Lugosi is an unbelievable, silly menace, the editing leaves out whole scenes so that the story is annoyingly choppy” (177). The works making up this collection, therefore, take into consideration myriad aspects related to the production, quality, and reception of these overlooked films. In this way, they assess the value of these films and emphasize the complex, interwoven evaluations of them by earlier and contemporary critics and scholars. Such a widened focus significantly strengthens and complicates the analyses making up this text.

Still, this collection, while otherwise an invaluable overview of this era of genre film, is somewhat problematized by its parameters, which are at times vague and inconsistent. While horror, fantasy, and science fiction films receive the most attention, and the inclusion of mystery films is successfully justified according to the horror elements they possess, those works representing the “B” western and broadly defined foreign genres appear to stray from the purpose of this research project. *Blue Steel* (1934), a conventional western starring John Wayne, is, for example, noted as a suitable inclusion to this collection due to scenes presenting a storm, a shadow-engulfed way station, and a particularly brutal murder. The analysis of the film and the critical responses of others that are woven into the analysis present the film, however, as predominantly a western typical of this era. Its inclusion and that of other western films seems at odds, therefore, with the overall purpose of the study.

Similarly, foreign films are included in the text, but the parameters determining their inclusion are at times vague and inconsistent. Though they, like their American counterparts, satisfy the requirement that they include “sound, be it dialogue, sound effects, or a music score,” there is no additional justification for those selected since, among these foreign features, most but not all “received United States release” (1). While a valuable overview of science fiction, horror, and fantasy films in this era, the text could therefore be strengthened by its inclusion of further foreign works or their exclusion according to such a requirement concerning a United States release. Similar also to the issue plaguing the “B” western movies analyzed, there is an inconsistency concerning some of the foreign films included. While *Pandora’s Box* (1929), with its dark visual elements and equally horrific plot involving Jack the Ripper, possesses qualities matching the purpose of this study, there are other foreign movies included

that venture from these parameters. The inclusion of the widely influential historical film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1929), for example, departs from the stated intension of the collection since it, while including violent depictions of public execution and mob violence, does not belong to the horror genre.

Though *Thrills Untapped* does, therefore, venture occasionally from its focus, it is a predominantly robust overview of overlooked horror, science fiction, and fantasy films. Besides the aforementioned depth and breadth of its analyses, the form and organization of the text provide additional strength to this publication. It is divided into five sections—preface, film analyses, appendix, bibliography, and index—that simplify efforts to locate particular films, references, and timelines. The film analyses section is organized alphabetically by movie titles, and each entry outlines key information, such as its production credits and cast members. Following this information is a summary and analysis of each movie into which is synthesized the voices of notable critics and scholars. An appendix is additionally included that lists the films in chronological order. The text contains a bibliography outlining books, periodicals, and websites germane to this research. Concluding the collection is an index listing the names of the reviewed films and individuals related to their production with corresponding numbers for the pages on which they are discussed. Ideally and logically organized, this text enables effective, timely research into its subject matter.

Suitable for scholars focused predominantly upon horror, fantasy, and science fiction films of the early sound era, *Thrills Untapped* continues the work of researchers at the intersection of genre fiction and film. Seeking to emphasize the value of these early motion pictures, it includes alongside original analyses valuable and in-depth information related to the production and reception of these movies. At times, the text ventures from its stated focus and evaluates films unrelated to the identified genres. Still, in illuminating widely overlooked movies and illustrating their importance for current film and science fiction studies, it fills a current gap in research and is therefore a valuable resource for scholars working in these fields.