

NEO-DANSES MACABRES AND PROTO-ZOMBIES IN EARLY CINEMA, 1897-1938

Prof. Vincent Masse
Thursday, November 21, 2019
Mona Campbell 1108, 5:30-7:00 pm

Amongst the “absolute best in zombie films” recommended in Glenn Kay’s *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide* (2008) is an unexpected entry: Abel Gance’s *J’accuse* (1938). While usually analysed from the perspective of European interwar pacifism (1919-1938), *J’accuse* nonetheless does indeed feature a literal “army of the dead”. In the words of Kay: “a war veteran/scientist who raises dead soldiers from all European nations that fought in the previous world war to mount a peace protest”.

Abel Gance’s *J’accuse* (1938) is a remake of his own original *J’accuse* (1919), which also features an army of dead soldiers, as well as skeletons dancing various “*danses macabres*”. *Danses macabres*? It turns out that dancing skeletons do creep up, in surprising ways, at various junctures in history, whenever “new media” appear: amongst the first “block books” in Germany we find dancing skeletons; the first illustrated printed book in France (1485) is full of dancing skeletons; Christiaan Huygens’s first slides, to demonstrate his “animated magic lantern” (1659), features one dancing skeleton; one of Auguste and Louis Lumière’s earliest shorts, to demonstrate their newly patented cinematograph (1895), features a dancing skeleton (1897), and so do numerous shorts from Georges Méliès.

My presentation will thus offer two opposite “archeological” perspectives on Gance’s undead. Seen from the past, they are the last dancers from a long, old chain dance of *danses macabres*. Seen as proto-zombies, they are at the forefront of a new tradition, marking the early rise of the “rising dead” in modern cinema.

The presentation will feature scenes from both versions of *J’accuse*, as well as 15th-19th century examples of *danses macabres* and early shorts from the Lumière brothers (*Le squelette joyeux* [*The Merry Skeleton*], 1897), Georges Méliès, and possibly Walt Disney (*The Skeleton Dance*, 1929).

PS: This talk takes place at the same time, same room, as the upcoming Winter class

FREN 2666 The End of the World, from Apocalypse to Zombies
Thursdays 5:35-8:25 pm
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