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# **LOOKING FOR THE BLIND DEAD: THE APPLICATION OF HISTORY AND MYTH IN AMANDO De OSSORIO'S HORROR QUARTET**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Knights Templar has generated a range of studies that include both academic histories and sensational exposés. The current resurgence of interest in all things Templar has been fuelled by, for example, the recent republication of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (M. Baignet, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln) and the enormous popularity of *The DaVinci Code*. With this in mind it seems appropriate to explore the relationship between these histories, the various myths and legends that surround the Knights Templar and how these are manifested in the quartet of *Blind Dead* films directed by Amando De Ossorio between 1971 and 1975. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to consider how the actual history of the Templars feeds into Ossorio's memorably horrific but totally fictional creations; a heady combination of mummy, zombie and vampire.

The depiction of the undead Templars across all four films - *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (1971), *Return of the Evil Dead* (1973), *The Ghost Galleon* (1974) and *Night of the Seagulls* (1975) – in many ways reflects the inconsistencies that surround the history of The Knights Templar and its supposed links with the occult. This paper will further seek to posit a link between the Templars as monstrous figures and other established generic icons such as vampires, mummies and the living dead. A detailed analysis of each film will illustrate how Ossorio employs discrete elements of Templar folklore to extend the fictional mythology of his own monsters, continually changing their origins, rituals and how they might or might not be vanquished.

We shall also show how Ossorio used established conventions of the horror genre in order to construct a monster unique in its physiognomy and which conforms to its own particular rules of space and time.

## **THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR -A BRIEF HISTORY.**

The Order of the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon were formed in 1119 twenty years after the capture of Jerusalem in the First Crusade. This order of pious warrior monks were initially few in number (tradition has it that there were only 9 of them at its inception) but their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience set them apart from the criminal and opportunistic rabble that made up most of the Christian ranks. The end of the First Crusade saw many lords and knights return to Europe, most had embarked on the venture in order to gain pardon for their earthly sins and were eager to leave the heat and dirt of the Holy Land as soon as possible. There was therefore no permanent Christian military force in the Middle East and although the large cities might have been under the control of various bands of Crusader knights the rest of the Holy Land was a dangerous place to travel through for the thousands were now making the pilgrimage from Europe to Jerusalem.

This small band of knights stationed in Jerusalem intended to make the Holy Land safer for pilgrims and provide a Christian military presence in the area. The Order of the Temple, more familiarly known as the Knights Templar therefore provided a vital service in the Middle east and was a force who found increasing favour with the monarchs and nobility of Europe, and even more importantly, the Pope in Rome.

Over the next 200 years the Knights Templar grew from a band of impoverished and devout knights

to a military force second to none in the Christian world with a extensive network of properties and enclaves across Europe and the Middle East. The Templars were able to do this due to several factors: firstly, their piety and obedience saw them avoid the pitfalls of debauched corruption common to the Crusades, alongside this, their disciplined military training made them the most feared opponents of the Saracen armies; the great Saracen leader, Saladin regarding them as Christendom's finest soldiers. The Order began accumulating vast wealth as it was bequeathed donations of money and property by European nobility as a means of remission of sin. Alongside these ever-increasing riches were several papal decrees that exempted the order from taxation. The Templar's wealth and communication network allowed them to create a means of financial transfers similar to a system of cheques. Money could be deposited with thr Templars in Europe in exchange for a bill of credit which could then be exchanged back for money in the Holy Land, thus avoiding the need to carry valuables on the hazardous journey east.

Thus the privileged Templars became a law unto themselves, and their ability to increase their riches (often due to nothing more than good housekeeping) led to the arousal suspicion and jealousy from some quarters. The fact that the order had permanent bases in the Holy Land led to rumours that they had 'gone native' and had adopted the social and religious practises of Islam; some of this may well have been true, but eating local food and dressing in clothes more suited to the climate seems more sensible rather than sinister. However these whisperings were to become the means of destroying the order. Although the Templars had properties and holdings across Europe (including several large properties in Spain and Portugal), their main holdings were in France, specifically in the Languedoc, a situation that became increasingly problematic for French kings. After the fall of Acre in 1291 the Crusades came to an end and the Templars no longer had a presence in the Holy Land, therefore losing their intended purpose. This, along with a period of religious ferment throughout Europe led to an increased animosity towards the Order amongst European clergy and nobility, most notably Philip IV of France. Events came to a head in 1307 when, after a series of accusations of heresy, the Templars were arrested en masse across France. The charges levelled against the Order included:

1. The worship of an idol called Baphomet.
2. The committing of sacrilegious acts – spitting and urinating on the cross and images of Christ.
3. Institutionalized sodomy.
4. Illegal financial practises.

A long period of inquisition and trial followed resulting in a series of Templar confessions and burnings at the stake. Similar purges occurred throughout several other countries of Europe and in 1312 the Order was abolished and its property (but not all its privileges) transferred to the Order of the Hospital of St. John.

## **AMANDO DE OSSORIO**

Amando De Ossorio was born in Galicia, a region in North Western Spain. Galicia is a place steeped in folklore and tales of ghosts, werewolves and witchcraft. There is some evidence to suggest that Ossorio's place of birth influenced his later filmmaking career.

After graduating from the School of Journalism, he worked as a writer until becoming involved in radio and film in the 1940s. Ossorio made some short films and a feature called *The Black Flag* (*La bandera negra*, 1956). By the 1960s he was working with a documentary film unit.

As Spain was still under rule of Franco at this time, politically speaking, the climate was quite

restrictive and it made it difficult for Ossorio (and others) to continue with experimental movies like *The Black Flag* so he then turned to more commercial projects.

After making a western in 1964 he moved into the horror genre. His first horror feature was called *Malenka* (1968), a vampire movie which is both frustratingly dull and absurd! Ossorio's second effort was altogether more interesting and successful, *Tombs of the Blind Dead* made in 1971. This was the first of his horror quartet about the zombie Templar Knights. Originally set in Galicia but, allegedly, due to problems with Spanish censors, some of the film had to be shot in Portugal. This time (unlike *Malenka*, which used traditional vampire mythology for its narrative base), Ossorio's monstrous creations were unique as the narrative of *TOTBD* revolved around the Templar Knights being resurrected.

The Templars ensured Ossorio's place in horror history. Much of Spanish horror at the time featured traditional generic monsters e.g. the vampires of Jose Larraz and Jess Franco, along with Paul Naschy's werewolf, Waldemar Daninsky, but Ossorio's Templars are a startlingly original creation. The Templar Knights had never been portrayed as figures of horror in film before and in Ossorio's diegesis their physiognomy is the stuff of nightmare - decaying skulls with wispy remnants of beards, garments in a state of decay and skeletal, mummified fingers.

Ossorio went on to make three more Templar horror movies which, despite narrative inconsistencies, one dimensional stereotypes and a tendency towards misogyny, are nonetheless interesting due to the on-screen antics of the zombie-like Templars.

Ossorio made further movies in the horror genre, but none have stood the test of time like the *Blind Dead* series, and what makes them fascinating is how Ossorio uses the documented history of the Templars alongside the myths surrounding them in order to create a monster which is both unique and terrifying.

## **HISTORY AND MYTH**

Since their demise the Templars have been the subject of much speculation. They are claimed to be origin for Freemasonry (often by Masonic groups seeking to enhance their allure and mystery), and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century they have been subject to several spurious exposes most of which have focussed on the lost treasure of the order or its continuation as a shadowy secret society. In the 1820s Sir Walter Scott used the Templars as villains in both *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, and the sinister aspect associated with the Order might be seen to originate from this time. The more prosaic story of how a pious order of monks were disbanded for the financial benefit of the French crown has been surreptitiously replaced with the more romantic and macabre tale of devil-worshipping heretics who brought secret treasures and knowledge from the mysterious Orient. Such tales have been further expanded in recent times. The sensational *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* posited that the Templars carried on as a secret society who held the secret of Christ's lineage up to the present day; on a more sublime note, Umberto Eco adapted elements of Templar folklore for Foucault's *Pendulum*, and we now have the ubiquitous *Da Vinci Code* which has unleashed a flood of Templar-based novels and histories.

Ossorio can be seen to have been something of a trend-setter in his use of the Templars for his *Blind Dead* quartet, and they have been used very seldom since (*The Minion* a Dolph Lundgren vehicle from 1999 and 2001's *Revelation* being the exceptions). Ossorio used aspects of the Templar legends across all four films, the one constant aspect being that the Order had derived an occult means of immortal life through the practise of human sacrifice, a somewhat exaggerated version of some of the charges actually levelled at the Templars. The most succinct explanation of

Templar history and myth is provided in the English language version of *Tombs of the Blind Dead*.

Most of the audiences in Europe would have little familiarity with the history of the Order, let alone American teenagers at drive-ins and grindhouse theatres, so this backstory is very important to contextualise the Templars, however fast and loose Ossorio plays with the facts. *Tombs of the Blind Dead* is specific in identifying as Templars but other films refer to them as 'Knights of the Orient' or 'Knights of the East'; this vagueness is complimented by Ossorio's own seeming reluctance to allow the films themselves to develop a consistent mythology for his creations. The origins, rituals and powers of his Knights are inconsistent across all four films. There is no narrative continuity between any of the quartet with the result that all four could be seen as 'stand-alone' films with little or no direct reference to others in the cycle. There seems a missed opportunity here, as both *Ghost Galleon* and *Night of the Seagulls* make no reference to why the resurrected Knights are blind or how they employ sound to hunt down their victims, but spend vast amounts of time on convoluted exposition that bears little weight. Some narrative continuity from the first two films might have avoided some of the tortuous explanations that beset the final two films of the quartet. Ossorio's use of historical accuracy becomes less strict as the series continues, although *Tombs of the Blind Dead* is not a faithful account of the Templars history it is far closer to it than the wilful disregard for time and place that features in *Ghost Galleon* and the abandonment of any reference to Templar history in *Night of the Seagulls*.

The lack of narrative continuity within the films is reflected in the absence of any attempt to link the films in their titles and advertising, anyone not a film aficionado would find it difficult to make any links between *TOTBD*, *ROTED*, *GG* and *NOTS* on their titles alone. This lack of consistency is ultimately frustrating and the available interviews with Ossorio never try to discover why he did not exploit the history and myths around the Templars in a more stringent fashion.

### **THE TEMPLARS AS MONSTERS**

We now want to consider further why Ossorio's Templars are unique and have become iconic horror figures. As we mentioned previously, the Knights Templar are not presented as figures of horror in any other earlier movies. However, despite their uniqueness, they do take on certain characteristics of other, more well-known, monsters.

Firstly, vampires - Ossorio's Templars, both in life and death, suck the blood of the living to gain immortality. Secondly, mummies - in this case their physiognomy, the skulls, hands and general appearance of decay links closely with elements of the mummy. And finally, zombies – the Templars are effectively living dead – they are brought back to life through certain rituals and with a hunger for the flesh of the living (which became a common zombie trait post- Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*).

Arguably, because Ossorio uses some characteristics of other iconic horror figures as well as presenting new ones, generically speaking the *Blind Dead* are an audience friendly mixture of similarity and difference. For example, when they return to life, after emerging from their graves they move in a slow but determined 'zombie-like' fashion ( an aspect seemingly referenced in the emergence of Fulci's resurrected conquistadors in *Zombie Flesh Eaters*). However, certain traits ensure that they are much more than simply a composite of other monsters and this is what makes them memorable in their own right.

One key aspect is Ossorio's use of sound in relation to time (also reflected in the narrative motif of the eyeless Templars finding their victims by sound). When the Templars pursue their victims on horseback they gallop across the screen in slow-motion., yet while the action on screen is expanded

temporally (and this includes the slowing down of the sound of the horses hooves)the music score remains a tempo -in other words at the original or normal speed. This combination of slowed down diegetic sound and image, along with the a tempo overlaid non-diegetic score gives these chase sequences an unsettling tone.

Certainly the slow-motion photography is an important element in relation to the impact of the figures of the Blind Dead,along with the distinctly unusual and creepy music score by Anton Garcia Abril. The score incorporates a range of strange sounds and different instruments - persistent low bass notes on the piano, a church organ, clanging bells, cymbals, rattling sounds, high pitched strings and choral chanting in a minor key - all used to great effect. The chanting element in particular is suggestive of the alleged occult practices of the Templars – a sort of flipside to spiritually uplifting Gregorian chant – and it's worth noting this 'occult' score prefigures Jerry Goldsmith's Oscar winning Omen score by five years.

Abril's score is certainly a crucial feature of all four films, as it not only alerts the audience to the inevitable return of the Templars, but it also underlines their gruesome misdeeds.

In order to illustrate the visual and aural techniques used by Ossorio to bring the Templars to life, we have a short montage sequence to show you before concluding.

## CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of each Blind Dead film is beyond the scope of this paper, however we hope that we may have identified the extent to which Ossorio drew upon both the history and myth surrounding the Knights Templar, and the inconsistencies within the films. In order to provide a better illustration of this we have, from our research, compiled a table that details the links and contradictions across all four films, their radically different export versions and the actual history of the Templars.

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