
The Witch Who Wasn't: The Erasure of Afrocentric Sorcery in *The Witch of Timbuctoo*

By Martin F. Norden

In 1935, Tod Browning began working on a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film that he hoped would be his crowning achievement as a Hollywood horror movie director: *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, a project based loosely on Abraham Merritt's novel, *Burn, Witch, Burn!* Responsible for such horrorfests as *Dracula* (1931), *Freaks* (1932), and *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), Browning had imagined a film that would feature one of his favourite character types - a middle-aged white male who relentlessly seeks revenge on those who have crossed him - within the context of a topic that had gained traction in Hollywood during the early 1930s: Afro-Caribbean witchcraft. In particular, he planned to highlight a character named Nyleta, a high priestess of voodoo who uses her dark magic to help a Parisian banker in his vengeful quest against former colleagues who framed him for crimes he did not commit. Unfortunately for Browning and fans of the horror genre, MGM did not allow him to create the film that he wanted; the embattled writer-director ended up making a highly watered-down version of the movie, retitled *The Devil-Doll*, that had expunged all references to witchcraft. It was a pale imitation, in several senses, of the film he had proposed. In the belief that a study of this film's mutilation can shed important light on movie production processes, political perspectives, racial/ethnic assumptions, and censorship concerns during the 1930s, this article traces the tortuous history of *The Witch of Timbuctoo* and the forces beyond Browning's control that led to the film's undoing.

The sordid and sorry tale of *The Witch of Timbuctoo* commenced when Browning began casting about for a follow-up project to *Mark of the Vampire*, that he hoped would scrub his *Freaks* debacle from the movie-going public's imagination and secure his place in the Hollywood firmament as a top horror film writer-director.^[1] He came upon *Burn, Witch, Burn!*, a novel initially published in serialised form in the pulp magazine *Argosy Weekly* in October and November of 1932 and then as a stand-alone book soon thereafter. Narrated by an anonymous physician, *Burn, Witch, Burn!* centres on Madame Mandilip, a mysterious woman who runs a toyshop in lower Manhattan and uses her knowledge of the dark arts for nefarious purposes; she injects the souls of her victims into dolls that obey her commands to commit murder.

The novel does not explain either the source of Mandilip's otherworldly powers or her motivation to kill,[\[2\]](#) but Browning saw the ambiguity as an opportunity to return to the intertwined subjects of voodoo and revenge that he had explored in the MGM film *West of Zanzibar* in 1928. Adapted from Chester DeVonde and Kilbourn Gordon's 1926 Broadway play *Kongo* and originally titled *The Dark Continent*,[\[3\]](#) this film starred legendary performer Lon Chaney as Phroso, a professional magician who plots a highly contrived, years-long revenge scheme against a rival. He does so while living near a community of voodoo-practicing people in a remote area of what was then called Tanganyika. The community members, who unwittingly play a role in Phroso's revenge plan, believe he has supernatural powers; he bamboozles them with his magic tricks and engages in voodoo practices himself as their "chief Evil Spirit chaser" (to quote from a title card). Browning relished the chance to revisit such provocative material, this time in a synchronous-sound film.

In addition, Browning could not help but be aware of kindred projects coming out of the US film industry during the early 1930s. Though not a voodoo film per se, *King Kong* (1933) featured the kind of exotic settings and strange rituals that Browning found appealing. Conspicuous films from around the same time that dealt specifically with voodoo included MGM's sound-era remake of *West of Zanzibar* titled *Kongo* (1932) and *White Zombie* (1932), a Haitian-set thriller that starred Browning's *Dracula* colleague Bela Lugosi. Other voodoo-themed films from the period were *Black Moon* (1934) starring Fay Wray of *King Kong* fame; *Ouanga*, also known as *Drums of the Night* (1936; in production in 1934); *Drums O'Voodoo* (1934), a.k.a. *Louisiana* and *She Devil*; *Obeah* (1935); and the improbably titled *Chloe, Love Is Calling You* (1934). Browning could see that a market existed for the type of film he had in mind, and he was clearly primed to make it.[\[4\]](#)

Browning purchased the movie rights to *Burn, Witch, Burn!* in the spring of 1935 and immediately recruited Guy Endore, a screenwriter who had contributed to the 1935 horror films *The Raven*, *Mad Love*, and Browning's own *Mark of the Vampire*, to help him develop a voodoo-laced narrative based on the Merritt novel. Working in close collaboration, the duo prepared a 37-page story that laid out their plans. This document - a pre-screenplay, in effect - included highly detailed descriptions of the proposed film's characters, actions, and settings. For example, Browning and Endore described the venue for Nyleta's ritual sacrifices in the following vivid terms:

Immense buttressed trees arch overhead like Gothic pillars. Flaring torches have been placed upright in the ground at strategic points around the ghastly altar [made up of human skulls]. The cleared space about the altar is ringed with hundreds of natives, their dark faces swimming with

highlights as they squat on their haunches.[5]

Browning and Endore's story, which they titled *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, strayed at considerable length from *Burn, Witch, Burn!* They focused their narrative on a character that does not exist in the novel: Paul Duval, a Parisian bank president framed for murder and embezzlement by three of his banking associates and sent to Devil's Island. Imprisoned for many years, the embittered and vengeful ex-banker strikes up a friendship with a fellow inmate from colonial Africa.[6] Browning and Endore named the younger man "Ba-oola," a moniker that recalled the name of another Browning character: Lunkaboola, a key figure in *West of Zanzibar*. As their relationship deepens, Paul and Ba-oola hatch a plot to escape; they succeed and cross the Atlantic soon thereafter. They reach Ba-oola's home country, whereupon they are greeted by his mother, Nyleta. The voodoo queen performs several bloody dark-arts rituals, prompting the horrified-but-fascinated Paul to begin devising a revenge scheme that would require Nyleta's magical assistance. Out of gratitude for helping her son escape from the *Île du Diable*, she agrees to travel with Paul to Paris to help him carry out a grisly plan that includes the kidnapping of Parisian riffraff, shrinking them to doll-size with no will of their own, and commanding them to slay Paul's erstwhile banking colleagues. In a throwback to Browning's 1925 film *The Unholy Three*, which starred Lon Chaney as a criminal who disguises himself as an old lady to evade the police, Paul masquerades as "Madame Mandilip," a kindly old woman who runs a toy store in the Montmartre area of Paris. The ruse allows him to elude the gendarmes, and the toyshop serves as an effective front for his and Nyleta's diabolical doings. Following the deaths of his victims, Paul meets with his estranged daughter Lorraine, who had believed him guilty of the crimes for which he was convicted. After reconciling with Lorraine and clearing the Duval family name, he commits suicide by setting fire to the toyshop and perishing within it.

An MGM story analyst praised the Browning-Endore narrative as "superlative horror stuff ... completely realized in the rough,"[7] and in May 1935 the studio gleefully listed *The Witch of Timbuctoo* among the dozens of films it planned to release during the 1935-36 season.[8] The following month, it published adverts in the trade press that breathlessly announced the anticipated film and its tri-continental narrative. One exemplary advert read: "Fantastic Voodoo rites in Africa, the horrors of Devil's Island and the mysteries of the Paris underworld. To be directed by Tod Browning as one of the most important mystery-horror thrillers of the year." [9]

Perhaps feeling the pressure to deliver a top-drawer horror film for MGM, Browning added another screenwriter with outstanding horror-film

credentials to his team: Garrett Fort, who had adapted the script for Browning's *Dracula* from the Hamilton Deane-John Balderston play and had served as the primary screenwriter on *Frankenstein* (1931). Browning, Endore, and Fort developed a shooting script for *The Witch of Timbuctoo* during July and August of 1935. During this time, Edwin Schallert of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Browning had been in touch with a "voodoo medicine man" from Port-au-Prince - the singularly named Owoli - for suggestions that might enhance the authenticity of their project.^[10]

Though one industry pundit approvingly labeled the *Witch of Timbuctoo* narrative "the wildest tale ever concocted in a studio story conference,"^[11] Browning and his writers found themselves caught in an increasingly restrictive situation. By mid-1934, Hollywood studios were required to submit their screenplays to the newly formed Production Code Administration, the US movie industry's self-regulatory organisation, for prior approval. Faced with mounting pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency and the spectre of federal censorship, the PCA cracked down on proposed films that contained even a whiff of impropriety. In mid-September 1935, PCA head Joseph Breen wrote a letter to MGM president Louis B. Mayer outlining numerous issues with *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, several of which dealt with the visualisation of Nyleta's black-magic rituals. "Ceremony of the sacrifice of a rooster should be deleted," Breen wrote of one such instance. "It should be indicated that this ceremony is performed without a sacrifice, or the showing of any blood."^[12] Known for his dislike of horror films, Breen was indirectly referring to several clauses in the Production Code as the basis for his authority: "Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled" (though it is far from clear if the PCA regarded voodoo as a "definite religion") and certain "subjects must be treated within the careful limits of good taste," including "brutality and possible gruesomeness" and "apparent cruelty to children or animals."^[13] In short, this scene and others in the proposed film had raised the hackles of the PCA authorities, and the studio reluctantly agreed to make the changes noted in the letter.

Despite Breen's interference, Browning and MGM still believed they had a viable horror film on their hands. That illusion was shattered in late 1935, when the British Board of Film Censors expressed serious objections to the proposed film. The censors' concerns were twofold; they believed the film's focus on voodoo and witchcraft would incite blacks then under colonial rule, and they feared that their approval of the film would inadvertently legitimise one of Italy's announced reasons for invading Ethiopia in October 1935: to stamp out voodoo and witchcraft in that country.^[14] The BBFC informed MGM representatives based in the UK that the exhibition of *The Witch of Timbuctoo* would be prohibited if

the film were made as described.

MGM executives felt they had little choice but to alter the film, and radically so; the British Empire represented a significant market for their films, and they needed to protect their financial interests at all costs. Instead of calling upon the Browning-Endore-Fort team to effect these changes, however, the executives followed a common studio practice of the day; they assigned several staff writers to perform major surgery on the screenplay. Drawn from more than one hundred screenwriters under contract to MGM,[\[15\]](#) these new writers—including Erich von Stroheim, Robert Chapin, and Richard Schayer—worked on separate sections of the script during January and February of 1936. None of them had any prior involvement with *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, and they had little if any interaction with each other while working on their revisions.[\[16\]](#) At the recommendation of MGM Story Editor Samuel Marx, they jettisoned the black magic material and converted the story into a “mad science” narrative similar to the ones conveyed in the Universal hit films *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). They replaced black Africans Nyleta and Ba-oola with a pair of white Europeans: Malita and Marcel, a French wife-and-husband team of mad scientists who operate a clichéd bubbling-beaker type of laboratory on Devil’s Island. The PCA and the British Board of Film Censors agreed to these changes, and Browning began filming in March 1936.[\[17\]](#)

Movie industry trade journals learned of the severe alterations and duly reported them to their readership. “Recently Metro was called to task by Great Britain over *The Witch of Timbuctoo*,” noted a *Variety* scribe. “Subject matter of the story was voodooism. To offend the British possessions would mean a serious crimp in the picture’s revenue were it banned, so the changes were made to eliminate the objectionable angles.” A writer for *The Hollywood Reporter* took a broader, and bitterer, perspective: “Once again a foreign government has stepped in to censor a Hollywood script for political reasons.” *Variety* published a synopsis of *The Witch of Timbuctoo* just as the film was going into production in late March 1936, and the summary makes it clear that Nyleta, her son, their homeland, and all traces of witchcraft had been removed from the story.[\[18\]](#)

The Witch of Timbuctoo was originally scheduled for release under that title on 12 June 1936, but last-minute studio tinkering forced its delay until the following month. One of the changes had to do with its title. With the revised film containing neither a witch nor any African locales, MGM decided to change the title to *The Devil-Doll* to accentuate one of the film’s miniaturised assassins. With this alteration, the erasure of witchery from the film was complete.

The Devil-Doll received mostly lukewarm reviews. Critics generally lauded the film for its special-effects cinematography and amusing mix of crime and humour, but, to Browning's chagrin, they faulted it for what they viewed as its weak attempts at horror.^[19] The highly diluted film was by no means the project he had originally envisioned, and it may well have contributed to his early retirement as a Hollywood director only three years later.

As I hope this study has shown, a toxic combination of Production Code strictures, Hollywood corporate greed, geopolitical posturing, and colonial paternalism and racism derailed what would likely have been a landmark film in the Hollywood representation of Afrocentric witchcraft. Audiences then and now could only imagine the horror film that *The Witch of Timbuctoo* might have been, and we are all the poorer for the unfortunate lacuna that resulted from the machinations of MGM, the Production Code Administration, and the British Board of Film Censors.

Notes

^[1] Hoping to capitalise on the enormous financial success of Universal's *Frankenstein* in 1931, MGM greenlighted Browning's ill-conceived *Freaks*. Featuring a story involving circus sideshow performers (many played by actors with severe impairments) who transform themselves from childlike to murderously vengeful with stunning speed, *Freaks* was a disaster at the box office and battered MGM's reputation. For more information about this troublesome film, which had been banned in the UK for more than thirty years, see Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 115-19.

^[2] The book alludes to "the dark flame of evil wisdom" in countries around the world over the centuries, but the reference is quite vague. Merritt seemed interested mainly in making the point that some things in this world cannot be explained by science.

^[3] The film's working title is observed in "Coast Notes," *Variety*, 4 April 1928.

^[4] Another illustration of the mainstream interest in voodoo was occurring on the other side of the US. In 1935, Orson Welles and John Houseman began developing plans for a New York theatrical production that became colloquially known as the "voodoo *Macbeth*." Set in Haiti and featuring an all-black cast, the Welles-Houseman *Macbeth* was staged the following year in Harlem's Lafayette Theatre. For sample critical assessments of the production, see Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *New York Times*, 15 April 1936; and Mark Randell, "Spotlight and

Screen," *Ridgewood (NY) Times*, 1 May 1936. For a contemporaneous Hollywood perspective on the allure of exotic voodoo rituals, see Henry A. Phillips, "Drums in the Jungle," *Photoplay*, February 1934, 78-80, 98-99.

[5] Quoted in Bret Wood, "The Witch, the Devil, and the Code: A Horror Story of Hollywood in the Golden Age," *Film Comment* 28, no. 6 (November-December 1992): 52-53.

[6] In perhaps a reflection of Hollywood's African imaginary of the time, Ba-oola and Nyleta's country of origin is unclear. The film's proposed title, *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, suggests Mali, then a French colony, but historian Bret Wood, who thoroughly investigated the film's production, asserted that the characters hailed from the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). See Wood, "The Witch, the Devil," 52.

[7] Quoted in Wood, "The Witch, the Devil," 52.

[8] "M-G-M Announces 49 for New Season," *Film Daily*, 7 May 1935; "Season's Beginning," *Philadelphia Exhibitor*, 15 May 1935; "M-G-M Plans 49; Lists 20 for Salesmen," *Motion Picture Daily*, 7 May 1935.

[9] Advert, *Motion Picture Herald*, 8 June 1935.

[10] Edwin Schallert, "Browning Preparing Voodoo Thriller," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 1935.

[11] Michael Jackson, "We Cover the Studios," *Photoplay*, July 1936, 47.

[12] Joseph Breen, letter to Louis B. Mayer, 13 September 1935, *Devil Doll* file, PCA collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[13] The Motion Picture Production Code is widely available on the internet. One sample website that carries it is <https://censorshipinfilm.wordpress.com/resources/production-code-1934/>.

[14] On this latter point, see Philip K. Scheuer, "A Town Called Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 1936. For some context on British concerns about witchcraft during the 1930s, see "Britain Disturbed by Outbreaks of 'Black Magic,'" *Albany Times-Union*, 4 June 1938, magazine sec., 6.

[15] See "103 Writers on M-G-M Roll," *Film Daily*, 12 May 1936.

[16] See "Studio Placements," *Variety*, 29 January 1936.

[17] Ralph Wilk, "A 'Little' from Hollywood 'Lots,'" *Film Daily*, 24 March 1936; "Advance Production Chart," *Variety*, 25 March 1936.

[18] "H'wood's Foreign Jams; Take Loss So Not to Offend," *Variety*, 25 March 1936; the anonymous *Hollywood Reporter* writer quoted in David Skal and Elias Savada, *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 200; "Advance Production Chart."

[19] For a sampling of the critical responses to *The Devil-Doll*, see Martin F. Norden, "'It's the Work of a Crazy Old Woman': Revenge of the Elderly in *The Devil-Doll*," in *Elder Horror: Essays on Film's Frightening Images of Aging*, ed. Cynthia Miller and Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019), 43.

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Freaks. Dir. Tod Browning, 1932

King Kong. Dir. Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1933

Kongo. Dir. William Cowen, 1932

Mad Love. Dir. Karl Freund, 1935

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Ouanga (Drums of the Night). Dir. George Terwilliger, 1936

The Raven. Dir. Lew Landers (Louis Friedlander), 1935

The Show. Dir. Tod Browning, 1927

The Unholy Three. Dir. Tod Browning, 1925

West of Zanzibar. Dir. Tod Browning, 1928

White Zombie. Dir. Victor Halperin, 1932

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