

DOUBLE FEATURE

"FURTIVENESS AND SECRETIVENESS SEEMED UNIVERSAL IN THIS HUSHED CITY OF ALIENAGE AND DEATH, AND I COULD NOT ESCAPE THE SENSATION OF BEING WATCHED..."

-- H.P. LOVECRAFT, "THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH"

On the surface, the two great streams of horror that flowed out of the 1930s would seem to have little in common. H.P. Lovecraft's "cosmic materialism" grew in intricate patterns of words, building sublime dread from the hints and edges revealed by modern science and technology. The "monster rally" horror films of Carl Laemmle Jr.'s Universal Studios (and even moreso Val Lewton's horror films for RKO), by contrast, kept the dialogue to a minimum and let light, shadow, and sound breathe life into the very same supernatural horror clichés that Lovecraft had dismissed as defunct relics of the previous century.

Lovecraft certainly dismissed the Universal horrors. In a 1933 letter, he wrote: "Last year an alleged *Frankenstein* on the screen would have made me drowse had not a posthumous sympathy for poor Mrs. Shelley made me see red instead. Ugh! And the screen *Dracula* in 1931 – I saw the beginning of that in Miami, Fla. – but couldn't bear to watch it drag to its full term of dreariness." Hollywood repaid the compliment, waiting until 1963 to adapt any Lovecraft tale to the screen (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*), and even then

hiding it under an Edgar Allan Poe title (*The Haunted Palace*).

But underground, appropriately enough, the two rivers blend. Both Lovecraft and Laemmle drew their archetypes from the Gothic "terror-tale" wellsprings of Shelley, Stoker, and Stevenson. And both responded to, and reflected, the terrors characteristic of their times. Hence, Lovecraft's re-tuning of the old horror standards, and the films' "Silver Nitrate Gothic" blend of timeless legend and modern tension, can combine to throw a black-and-silver spotlight on the Mythos – or paint a Mythos shadow behind the made-up monsters -- for *Trail of Cthulhu* gaming.

Lovecraft Meets the Wolf Man

"I MAY BE ABLE TO BRING YOU PROOF THAT THE SUPERSTITION OF YESTERDAY CAN BECOME THE SCIENTIFIC REALITY OF TODAY."

-- DR. VAN HELSING, *DRACULA*
(TOD BROWNING, DIR.)

For all Lovecraft's dismissal of the "childish folk-elements" of the previous

century's horror fiction, he was unwilling to completely abandon them in his own work. His earlier fiction happily trades in such standard tropes, and even his later hyper-scientific horrors recapitulate and reshape the Gothic horror archetypes rather than rejecting them entirely. This brief examination of Lovecraft's treatment of these standards may inspire *Trail of Cthulhu* Keepers to likewise project the classic figures through a Cthulhoid lens.

The Vampire

Lovecraft's tales actually include two traditional vampires. The monstrosity in the basement of "The Shunned House" is a pseudo-scientific translation of the disembodied blood-drinking spirits of New England folklore; it absorbs the entire personality and life-force of its victims, and engages in a sort of mesmeric possession similar to Lugosi's (and Stoker's) *Dracula*. The "vampiristic attacks" in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* are carried out by a "lean, lithe, leaping monster with burning eyes which fastened its teeth in the throat or upper arm and feasted ravenously." To seal the deal, this vampire is even the resurrected corpse of a black magician, namely Joseph Curwen. Slightly widening our examination we find two more near-vampires. A different black magician, the witch Keziah Mason in "Dreams in the Witch-House," nurses her familiar Brown Jenkin on her own blood, "which it sucked like a vampire." (Brown Jenkin also echoes the traditional vampire's connections to dreams and rats.) Wilbur Whateley's twin, the invisible Son of Yog-Sothoth, fed on cattle "sucked most dry o' blood." Other elements of the vampire recombine in the titular "Colour Out of Space," which drains the life-energies of its victims and drives

them into Renfield-like madness, or even in Cthulhu himself, a dead aristocrat dreaming in his crypt and struck down by a wooden ship through the heart.

The Werewolf

Lovecraft also directly adduces a werewolf legend in "The Shunned House," as part of the ancestry of the house's vampire spirit, which furthermore takes on "wolfish shapes" in the smoke and possesses "wolfish and mocking" eyes. (The exceedingly minor Lovecraft collaboration "The Ghost-Eater" is a straight werewolf tale.) One can also read any of Lovecraft's tales of possession, from "The Shadow Out of Time" to *Charles Dexter Ward* (again) as werewolf stories, stories of a human being transformed into something brutish against his will. On a still more symbolic level, the act of being "bitten" by the Mythos curses unlucky or unwary scholars with inhuman knowledge -- in some cases, such as Olmstead in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," leading to physical transformation also. Finally, "The Hound" features a human sorcerer changed into an immortal canine monster, complete with a grave-robbing scene the equal of anything from James Whale or Curt Siodmak.

The Reanimated Corpse

Which leads us to the various reanimated corpses of the 1930s' cinematic horrors, from *White Zombie* to *Frankenstein*. Lovecraft's most famous Frankenstein is of course Herbert West, the Reanimator, whose story of hubris and nemesis closely resembles those of his cinematic successors. On the literary front, Lovecraft's titular "Outsider" is an agonized Gothic hero-corpse in the mold of Mary Shelley's articulate Monster. Other revenants appear in Lovecraft, whether hinted (as in "The Statement of Randolph Carter"), sidelined (as with the things in the pits in *Charles Dexter Ward*), or inhuman (the thawed Elder Things in *At the Mountains of Madness*).

The Mummy

Closely related to the reanimated corpse is the immortal monster-magus embodied by Boris Karloff's "Ardath Bey" in *The Mummy*. This is one of Lovecraft's favorite tropes. In "He," "The Terrible Old Man," "The Picture in the House," "The High House in the Mist," "Dreams in the Witch-House," and "The Thing on the Doorstep" Lovecraft covers virtually all the immortality bases; the last even includes a romantic entanglement with the immortal wizard. "The Festival" combines an immortal inhuman magus-figure with *The Mummy*'s trope of reincarnations (or descendants) falling victim to ancient machinations. (The same vibe of primordial evil descending on modern everymen is a core Lovecraftian sensation, perhaps most explicit in "The Shadow Out of Time.") The undying sorcerers of "Cool Air" and "The Horror at Red Hook," meanwhile, also have that whiff of Orientalism that makes *The Mummy* (and especially its sequels) such a guilty pleasure. "The Nameless City" and "Under the Pyramids" add actual mummies to the mix along with their Arabian and Egyptian settings. "Out of the Aeons" may have the best Lovecraftian mummy per se, but surely the ghouls of "Pickman's Model" and *Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* are Lovecraft's most characteristic blends of the immortal, the magical, and the exotic.

The Mad Scientist

On the other side of the reanimated corpse is the reanimator, or in larger terms, the mad scientist, the "Henry Frankenstein." In addition to Herbert West, Lovecraft presents us with Crawford Tillinghast in "From Beyond," Dr. Clarendon in "The Last Test," Dr. Munoz in "Cool Air," the murderous entomologist Slauenwhite in "Winged Death," and perhaps even the electrical showman Nyarlathotep in "Nyarlathotep." Although the inventor of the "cosmic radio" in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" is almost a sympathetic figure, he could easily be played as a mad experimenter on the insane and unfortunate. Symbolically, virtually all

of Lovecraft's protagonists (especially the overwhelmingly academic later ones) are "mad scientists" exploring the frontiers of Things Man Was Not Meant To Know, and suffering for their hubris.

The Old Dark House

One staple of 1930s horror films is the "old dark house," which was already a cliché when James Whale campily exalted it in *The Old Dark House* (1932). In its pure form, this location entraps the protagonists, usually innocent travelers forced to take shelter, in the ongoing Gothic story line of the house and its inhabitants. (The house isn't always old, or even dark; in *The Black Cat*, it's a gleaming Modernist trophy.) Lovecraft's purest Old Dark House is probably the de Russey mansion in "Medusa's Coil," complete with its overheated narrative of curses and murder. To an extent, Lovecraft's stories are exercises in widening the Old Dark House. In "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" the whole town of Innsmouth is the "Old Dark House," in *At the Mountains of Madness* Antarctica enmeshes human protagonists in the ongoing "family drama" represented by the primordial rivalry of the Elder Things and shoggoths, and such tales as "Call of Cthulhu" and "Shadow Out of Time" hint that the entire world across geological epochs is an Old Dark House, complete with Things penned up in the attic waiting to get loose.

The Cursed Lineage

"Legacy" sequels like *Son of Dracula* and *Son of Frankenstein* foreground the old Gothic horror concept of the cursed lineage, as do films like *Cat People*. This is another favorite Lovecraft trope, from "Arthur Jermyn" to "The Dunwich Horror" to "The Festival" to *Charles Dexter Ward*. Sometimes the cursed lineage is entirely external to the hero, as in "The Shunned House" or "The Lurking Fear," but more often it is intimately bound up in the protagonist's self-hood, as in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" or "The Rats in the Walls."

The Haunted Island

From the Haiti of *White Zombie* and the Saint-Sebastian of *I Walked With A Zombie* to King Kong's Skull Island, the mysterious island (often jungled) where the monster dwells is another powerful symbol in cinematic 1930s horror. Likewise, Lovecraft used it powerfully, if surprisingly sparingly, in his own fiction. His emblematic "Monster Island" is of course R'lyeh, the sunken island that rises in "The Call of Cthulhu." R'lyeh is prefigured by the island of "Dagon," and by the sunken Atlantis in "The Temple." The similarly haunted island of Mu appears only in the "flashback sequence" of "Out of the Aeons," and it's probably pressing the point to claim that Australia represents a haunted island in "Shadow Out of Time." Still more tangentially, this may be the context in which to note that Lovecraft's take on searching for mysterious apes in the jungle, "Arthur Jermyn," like *King Kong*, touches on interspecies romance, although Lovecraft foregrounds the issue and plays it for horror rather than pathos.



The Silver Nitrate Mythos

"MY FRIEND SAID THEY WERE HORRIBLE AND IMPRESSIVE BEYOND MY MOST FEVERED IMAGININGS; THAT WHAT WAS THROWN UPON A SCREEN IN THE DARKENED ROOM PROPHESIED THINGS NONE BUT NYARLATHOTEP DARE PROPHESEY..."

**-- H.P. LOVECRAFT,
"NYARLATHOTEP"**

The themes of horror, like its images, often flow from the same well. Some elements, such as xenophobia, the degenerate family, or the clash of modernity with the undead past, are traits of the literary Gothic, and emerge in Lovecraft as well as in the Universal and RKO horrors. Likewise, the movies and the Mythos both share

contemporary fears of the loss of the self (to werewolfism or Deep One blood), and share in the Frankenstein-inspired (or Faustian) fear of science and knowledge. In the age of Freud and Hitler, of industrial change and global war, such fears naturally bubble up, in celluloid and in pulp.

But other central themes of the 1930s monster movies do not immediately conform to Lovecraftian patterns. For example, as with conventional films of the era, virtually all of them involve romance, if only as a tacked-on subplot. Other concerns are more specific to Universal or RKO horror films. Accentuating those Silver Nitrate Gothic elements, which are often sublimated or downright submerged in Lovecraft's tales, brings a whole new palette to a *Trail of Cthulhu* game -- Turner Classic Movies instead of *Weird Tales*.

Predatory and Perverted Sexuality

From the subtle simmer of *I Walked With A Zombie* to the manic melodrama of *Mummy's Hand*, the Silver Nitrate Gothic is all about sex. The monsters embody predatory, even fatal, sexuality in virtually every case from the Wolf Man, cursed to kill the woman he loves, to Kong, slain by beauty. Above and beyond the simple horror of monster-human mating, the sex on offer is perverse and sterile: Dracula's oral fixation, Irina's repression in *Cat People*, the Monster's promise to Frankenstein to "be with you on your wedding night," and its sequel with two madmen giving birth to a new Eve. It gets even more lurid just below the surface, from Kong's bondage fetish to lesbian overtones in *Dracula's Daughter* to necrophilia and incest in *The Black Cat*. Lovecraft's horror-towns full of miscegenation and inbreeding hint around the same territory, although his revision tale "Medusa's Coil" and to a lesser extent "The Thing on the Doorstep" are the only places where sexuality takes anything like the foreground. But the material is there to be mined, if the Keeper and

players feel up to it. Simply putting a sexual through-line in every scenario (whether central or secondary) will juice the Mythos in unfamiliar directions rich with roleplaying possibilities. You don't even have to violate your players' personal Hays Code -- just hint and whisper and suggest, like the scripts of the 1930s had to.

Psychology

Perhaps appropriately for the great age of Freudian film-making, the other great obsession of the Silver Nitrate Gothic is psychology. *The Wolf Man* begins with a psychological definition of lycanthropy, and much of Larry Talbot's torment comes from believing himself insane. The trance phenomena in *I Walked With A Zombie* can be explained as hypnosis, hysteria, or any other mental illness. The Boris Karloff film *Bedlam* is set in an 18th-century madhouse, and the 1932 version of *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* is likewise told in starkly Freudian terms, as the war of id and superego. In *Ghost of Frankenstein*, Ludwig Frankenstein combines his ancestor's surgical interests with a specialization in "diseases of the mind," making explicit the psychological inferences in the first film. (For instance, the Monster's "abnormal brain" is the creation of the 1931 scriptwriter, not Mary Shelley.) The dubious Dr. Judd in Val Lewton's *7th Victim* and *Cat People* is a psychologist, combining the Van Helsing-style "scholar-hero" with the "mad scientist." For all Lovecraft's obsession with insanity, very few of his characters really possess psychological motivations (as opposed to nervous or "artistic" temperaments) of the sort that 1930s film audiences would recognize. The younger Peaslee, in "Shadow Out of Time," is HPL's only important psychologist narrator; the Silver Nitrate Gothic has psychologists, pro and amateur, oozing out of every script. Keepers should work with the players' Drives to emphasize such concerns, and draw NPCs' mind-scapes in even starker terms. Designing the landscape, or the weather, to reflect psychological strain

(or symbolism) is practically de rigeur for the Gothic, whether Silver Nitrate or no.

Corpses and Mutilation

Film scholar David J. Skal proposes that the memories of the First World War, and the increasing fears of a Second, lay behind the Universal films' propulsive interest in corpses, especially mutilated corpses. From *White Zombie* to *Frankenstein*, the dead are everywhere on screen. *Freaks* and *Island of Lost Souls* both feature mutilation and the grotesque not merely as sudden shocks (as in the "unmasking" scene in *Phantom of the Opera*) but as ongoing themes, as do arguably *Bride of Frankenstein* and the other sequels in that franchise. While early tales such as "Herbert West — Reanimator" and "The Lurking Fear" both feature corpses and plenty of 'em, Lovecraft's body count dwindles as his fiction gets more cosmic. (The arguable exception, *At the Mountains of Madness*, features multiple vivisections, albeit all at a remove.) Here, the explicitly forensic nature of GUMSHOE can help convey that Silver Nitrate Gothic feel — describing the corpse in detail should provide both clues and grue.

Economic Fear

Skal also argues that the arrival of the horror film genre and the Great Depression were not unconnected. Audiences, he says, sublimated and transferred their economic fears into supernatural terrors, expiated at least momentarily on the silver screen. Ann Darrow in *King Kong*, and Mary Gibson in *7th Victim*, both explicitly skirt economic disaster before toppling into their respective horrors. Bela Lugosi can represent both predatory capitalism and dehumanizing Communism (depending on the viewer) in both *Dracula* and *White Zombie*. In *The Wolf Man*, Larry Talbot adds class insecurity to his other identity problems — is he a middle-class American or a British aristocrat? Class conflict is even more pronounced in other British-set films of the era, from

Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde to *The Body Snatcher* to *The Lodger*. Lovecraft's greatest evocation of economic fear comes in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," featuring the devil's bargain for prosperity with the Deep Ones, and its dismal outcome. That said, the stricken Gardners in "The Colour Out of Space," and even the impoverished urban victims in "Dreams in the Witch-House" and "Haunter of the Dark" demonstrate that even the most reactionary of authors was not immune from the economic currents of the Depression. Motivating Investigators by naked greed (or by desperation as their obsession with the Mythos erodes their Credit Rating) may or may not be possible in any given campaign, but economic tension and despair can always drive NPCs to foolish or evil acts.

Blasphemy

The Silver Nitrate Gothics seemingly rejoice in blasphemy. Henry Frankenstein has replaced both God and Adam, there are Satanic cults in *The Black Cat* and *The 7th Victim*, Count Dracula becomes Renfield's invert-Messiah, and everywhere the natural, Godly order is mocked. Conventional religion is almost never shown in a sympathetic or helpful guise, but revealed only as the stark negative to the horrors on screen. Again, for all that Lovecraft uses the term "blasphemous" to describe his monstrosities, religion is not mocked so much as almost entirely absent in Lovecraft. (With the exception of the cuckoo's egg cult of the Starry Wisdom, nestled in the abandoned shell of a Providence church.) Where a Pulp idiom game might present crucifixes and holy water as suitable weapons against the undead, a Purist game can bring a church, or even all human religion, into the foreground as yet another symbolically mutilated corpse.

Randomness

Finally, the Universal horrors are surprisingly random. Becoming the reincarnated target of a mummy's passion, or stumbling into an old dark house, or having a vampire as a next-door

neighbor, is almost always a matter of pure chance. "Even a man who is pure of heart," after all, can become a werewolf. For all Lovecraft's conceptualizing of an arbitrary cosmos, virtually all of his protagonists invite their own doom, Frankenstein-style. Only the narrator of "The Picture in the House" (who takes a classic *Old Dark House*-style "shortcut" in a storm), the Gardner family struck down by an almost literal bolt from the blue in "Colour Out of Space," and the elder Peaslee in "Shadow Out of Time," randomly selected by the Great Race of Yith, truly embody the random victim. The Keeper can emphasize such things by aiming the trail of clues toward the arbitrary cause rather than toward the victim's behavior, or simply by rolling dice to select the next victim in the narrative thread.

The End ... ?

Even at their most arbitrary, the universal horrors of the Silver Nitrate Gothics still yield to a higher order. The monsters are defeated, usually by embodiments of order, whether traditional (the mob of reactionary peasants), religious (crosses, hellish fire, or silver bullets), or dramatic (conventional human love triumphs over Dracula, the Mummy, and Kong). This happens more rarely in Lovecraft -- "The Dunwich Horror," "The Shunned House," *Charles Dexter Ward* -- though it does happen. Most *Trail of Cthulhu* adventures will probably end likewise. But in the Universal horrors, just like in *Trail of Cthulhu* campaigns, there's always a sequel. There are always monsters surviving from the past, always new madmen playing God, always desperate fools waiting to be deceived. The world of the Silver Nitrate Gothic is more Lovecraftian than we think.



BACKLOT GOTHIC

East Of Switzerland,

West Of Hell

When the investigators travel to the Backlot Gothic setting, they're leaving the "hacked from the history books" world that is the default for *Trail Of Cthulhu* and entering a nether region that is less a location than a literary conceit. It is an eerie atmosphere evoked through wildly expressionistic visuals, florid dialogue, and a sometimes dreamlike logic.

The phrase "Backlot Gothic" is not a term in use by characters in the world. In the movies that inspire it, sense of place is deliberately obscured. Instead, the investigators might be told that they are traveling to a "certain remote province in the dark heart of Europe." Sometimes a specific region will be identified—most notably Transylvania. More often, characters may refer to being situated in a province or state but will never state where exactly they are. Cultural markers, from costumes to proper names, mix German, Swiss, Austrian elements with hints of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Amongst these influences one also finds a heady streak of imaginary, Gothic-revival England.

The characters of Backlot Gothic are aware of the rest of the world, making reference to places like England and America, but are detached from the historical horrors slowly tightening their grip on it. Though a place of morbidity and doom, Backlot Gothic is also an escapist fantasy. It may be very near to Austria, but you'll find no swastikas, no Gestapo officers, and no Hitlerian oratory blazing from the radio.

Dread Albion

On certain nights, when the moon is full and the color drains from the land, some sections of the British Isles take on a terrible remoteness, displaying an unmistakable kinship to the Backlot Gothic setting. For a similar excursion into celluloid horror on the Yorkshire moors or Scottish Highlands, strip out the central European costumes, names and job titles, but keep the gloomy atmosphere, Gothic scene descriptions, and sense of arrested modernity. Downplay the technological restrictions that prevail in the Teutonic/Slavic version of the setting. Automobiles ought to be acceptable here, for example. You don't have to resort to literary conceit to rule out tommy-guns, which are already highly restricted throughout the country.

For that matter, you'll find no radio, as Backlot Gothic is curiously unstuck in time. Just as it blends cultural indicators from English, Teutonic and Balkan cultures, its chronological signposts are a hodge-podge ranging from the renaissance to the modern. Here you'll find trains but no automobiles; instead the primary land conveyance is the horse-drawn carriage. The haunted backwaters of Backlot Gothic entirely lack airstrips, landing fields, planes, or zeppelins. There are no radios or telephones; investigators will have to do their legwork by physically traveling from the police station to the count's castle and then down to city hall. Characters may wield luger pistols but never a tommy gun. The flashlight is unknown here; occasionally you'll see a mob of villagers armed with lanterns, but the most popular source of nighttime illumination remains the torch—that's the flaming kind, not the electric. Yet at the same time, the setting's secret laboratories spark and fizz with futuristic equipment bordering on the fantastical. A mad scientist may equip his lair with impossible devices, such as a surveillance system which records moving images of intruders and broadcasts them to a viewing

screen—in *simultaneous time*! However, these remain alarming rarities—reason alone for the townsfolk to storm the castle, angry torches held aloft.

Because Backlot Gothic is a literary conceit, a collection of associations and images meant to evoke a feeling of delicious and flamboyant dread, the characters remain unconscious of its geographical, stylistic, and temporal oddities. The players may make self-aware jokes about its various departures from realism, but their *characters* never question them. Like the NPCs, they never stop to definitively locate the place on a map, nor do they speak out loud the name of the country they're visiting. Scenes of travel between the historical world and Backlot Gothic are elided, to avoid embarrassing questions of when one reality ends and the other begins. The PC who habitually wields a tommy-gun now has no machine gun on his person and takes no onstage measures to acquire one. (If the player insists on trying to find one, you simply tell him that his attempts have failed and quickly move back to the storyline at hand.)

Stock Footage

The expressionistic horror movies of the 1930s make bold use of visuals to evoke their world of delicious dread. In the verbal medium of roleplaying, Keepers lack the full range of filmic devices at the disposal of film directors. To convey visual information, you must either show the players images, or engage in prose description. In the latter case, you might cue up brief snippets from your DVD collection, or find appropriate clips from Internet video sharing sites.

Many groups find large sections of text read verbatim to be distancing, and tune out after a few lines. That said, this setting, with its roots in classic literature, is particularly well suited to brief, well-placed moments of prose description. To that end, we've divided up what in another game book might be sections of descriptive text meant for the GM alone into blocks of text we're calling "stock footage." Like the filmic equivalent, these are pieces of description ready to drop into a narrative context of your choosing. These can be used at appropriate moments in any of the scenarios provided in this book, or in cases of your own devising. For example, the description of train travel given on this page is suited to the investigator's first journey into Backlot Gothic, whatever that happens to be in your campaign.

Accordingly, we've written much of the description in this chapter in the second person, so that it not only tells you, the Keeper, what sort of visual images to associate with it, but is packaged to allow you to convey these to the players. Paragraphs of stock footage are preceded by the identifying <SF> icon. They are preceded by a brief descriptive tag, in boldface, so you can find them by quickly scanning this chapter when needed. Stock footage passages are broken up into short passages; unless your group is unusually hungry for canned text, avoid reading more than one of them at once. The more sparingly you use them, the more powerful they'll seem. Editing or paraphrasing the stock footage passages as needed to fit the situation at hand.

Stock footage can also create the illusion that the group is on the right track in a closely prepared adventure. This can be useful for groups who crave a sense of strong direction. For groups who fear railroading, show your hand, telling them that the narrated passages float free from any pre-scripted storyline.

You may find it useful to prepare for scenarios of your own creation by writing sections of stock footage tailored to them. The group may or may not venture into the old mill; if they don't, you can always clip and save your old mill description for a later case.

When writing your own descriptions, subliminally drain this world of color. Omit mention of shades; instead, talk of light and dark, of shadows and gradations.

Movie fans learn to recognize certain bits of overused stock footage. Unless you're intentionally trying to underline the unreality of your game setting, you'll want to avoid this effect, by ticking off the descriptions after using them for the first time. Otherwise you might earn an unintended laugh by reusing a memorable bit of prose.

Stock footage is another example of a GUMSHOE player-facing technique: it takes something normally reserved for the GM (in this case, background description) and turns it around to face the players.

Absent Technologies

It's easy enough to determine that certain categories of item—including cars, planes, telephones, and flashlights—are unavailable here. When certain items in a category seem right and others don't, the task becomes trickier. For example, the following firearms are not available:

Nambu Type 14 pistol, Walther P38 9mm, FN Browning High-Power 9 mm, Smith & Wesson Model 27 .357 Magnum revolver, Thompson M1921 submachine gun, "Schmeisser" MP28 submachine gun.

Guns are always rare. Even the local inspector may be unarmed. Members of the gentry likely possess rifles and shotguns for hunting. The most sophisticated missile weapon fielded by mobs of enraged townsfolk is the thrown rock. Most brandish farming implements: hoes, shovels, rakes, and, of course, pitchforks.

On the other hand, dynamite unquestionably exists here, and is accessible even by the peasantry. They may threaten to blow up haunted castles, or wreak explosive havoc during a scenario's final descent into monstrous anarchy.

When in doubt, resort to the overall rule: if it doesn't feel like it would be in a classic 30's horror movie, it can't be found in Backlot Gothic, and its absence is not an issue to the people who live there.

