

Isle of the Dead

USA | 1945 | 71 minutes

Credits

Director	Mark Robson
Screenplay	Ardel Wray Val Lewton / Josef Mischel (uncredited)
Photography	Jack MacKenzie
Music	Leigh Harline

Cast

Gen. Nikolas Pherides	Boris Karloff
Thea	Ellen Drew
Oliver Davis	Marc Cramer
Mrs. Mary St. Aubyn	Katherine Emery

In Brief

During the war of 1912, Greek general Nikolas Pherides (Karloff) pays an overdue visit to the island tomb of his beloved wife. But once there, he discovers all the graves have been raided and a strange superstition prevalent among the locals.

Seems they believe in the presence around them of vorvolakas: wofen-spirits who assume human shape during the day, but at night become vampiric demons and drain the healthy of blood and life.

Soon, Pherides finds the natives are dying one by one...but are old world vorvolakas responsible or could there simply be a deadly plague running afoul on the island?

Another thoughtful exercise on the duality of science & the supernatural, this classy terror from producer Lewton is nicely helmed by director Robson (1943's excellent *Seventh Victim*) and well acted by Drew and Karloff.

With swine flu and religious extremism (sadly) popular topics of conversation at the close of the first decade of the 21st century, few Boris Karloff films are as topical as *Isle of the Dead*, his first collaboration with renowned writer/producer Val Lewton (though a delay in production caused it to be released after *The Body Snatcher*).

Set in 1912, this subtly chilling picture offers the perfect showcase for Karloff's much-underrated range as an actor as he essays the role of General Nikolas Pherides, a morally rigid Greek soldier fighting in the First Balkan War. Forcing a disloyal comrade to commit suicide on the battlefield is the cold act that first bonds Pherides to American reporter Oliver Davis (Marc Cramer), who first condemns him, and then apologizes for making an insulting comment about Pherides being willing to sacrifice his own wife, whom the reporter doesn't realize is already dead.

Accepting the newsman's offer to place flowers on his wife's grave, Pherides leads Davis across the plague-infested Greek countryside to the island where the remains of Pherides' wife lie. When the general discovers the tomb has been violated, he and Davis are about to return to camp when the hypnotic sound of a distant voice in strange song leads them to the home of gregarious archeologist Albrecht (Jason Robards, Sr.) and his guests: married couple St. Alban (Alan Napier) and his sickly wife, Mary (Katharine Emery), who travel with Mary's beautiful young caretaker, Thea (Ellen Drew); Madame Kyra (Helen Thimig), a wildly superstitious older woman; and the eccentric Andrew Robbins (Skelton Knaggs)—who dies quickly and mysteriously soon after Pherides and Davis accept Albrecht's offer to stay for the night.

Seeking the counsel of Dr. Drossos (Ernst Deutsch) because he fears the worst, Pherides quickly has his suspicions confirmed: septicemic plague has arrived on the island and claimed its first victim. Reeling from the shock, Albrecht's houseguests announce their intentions to make themselves scarce, only to hear a stern, and repeated, command from Pherides:

"No one may leave the island."

Madame Kyra pulls Pherides aside, and voices her suspicions that young Thea is, in fact, to blame for visiting death upon the house. She believes Thea to be a vorvolaka, a vampire-like creature of ancient folklore that, sans fangs, nevertheless sucks the life force out of victims through an unspecified macabre power.

The remainder of *Isle of the Dead*, skillfully directed by Mark Robson, plays out as a literate and unnerving tale of superstition and survival. We soon learn of Mary St. Alban's terrifying spells of catalepsy—a condition rendering the sufferer rigidly paralyzed and desensitized to pain, leading to the possibility her coma-like state could be misconstrued as death—and thus her fear of being buried Karloff and Ellen Drew alive. As each member of the quarantined group fights to avoid the ravages of the plague, Karloff's general slowly but surely becomes convinced that he may, indeed, be in the presence of a supernatural being—and like all of the general's enemies, Thea eventually becomes a target to be snuffed out.

Consistently undervalued as a quality Lewton picture, often taking a backseat in esteem to the much more visibly admired *The Body Snatcher* (one of Karloff and Bela Lugosi's most memorable pairings) and *Bedlam* (Karloff in a madhouse!), *Isle of the Dead* is nevertheless a haunting gem, brimming with nuanced performances from its gifted ensemble cast.



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Of special note is Ernst Deutsch as Drossos, the physician whose stiff military discipline is unmasked in a genuinely disconcerting and moving conversation between him and Albrecht, a deeply skeptical man who has made a wager with Pherides to trust more in prayers to Olympian god Hermes than the powers of medicine. When Drossos realizes that he has, at last, been stricken, he faces his certain fate with melancholy bravery:

"I meet my old familiar enemy, death. I have fought him before. I have won often. Now, He wins."

Karloff as PheridesThe real fireworks, of course, belong to Karloff, whose journey from sanity to madness is a marvel of discretion and raw force. Early on in the film, Karloff's first encounter with Cramer affords the horror star once again the chance to demonstrate how quickly—and effectively—he can swing from the “dark” to the “light,” his icy sentence to a condemned underling sharply dovetailing into the gentle grace with which he forgives Cramer for invoking the name of his deceased wife. Karloff is a master at these steep, difficult shifts in tone, and it is these kinds of choices that set the viewer constantly on edge and make Pherides compellingly unpredictable.

At the same time, when he turns on the menace, Karloff has few (if any) peers. It's perhaps not as well known as it should be how much great cinematic acting depends largely on the subtle (with his performance in *The Mummy* often hailed as a masterwork of minimalism), but in this picture, Karloff's fall into desperate unreason has all of the intensity—and none of the histrionics—that makes for a timeless film performance.

Not just timeless, certainly, but timely. In the midst of a long and threatening crisis, the temptation to surrender one's reason often takes a strong hold. Threats real and imagined grip this nation. *Isle of the Dead* is not a bad place to start to learn some valuable lessons about what weakens humanity, and how it takes nothing more than fear to create true horrors.

George D. Allen

Isle of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin

Isle of the Dead (*Die Toteninsel*) is the best known painting of Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). Prints of the work were very popular in central Europe in the early 20th century — Vladimir Nabokov observed that they were to be "found in every Berlin home." Freud, Lenin, and Clemenceau all had prints of it in their offices.

Böcklin produced several different versions of the mysterious painting between 1880 and 1886.

Description and meaning

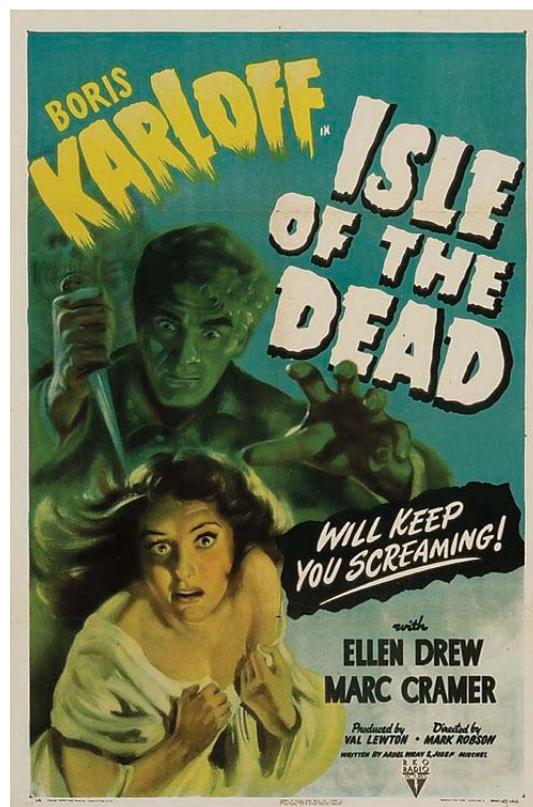
All versions of *Isle of the Dead* depict a desolate and rocky islet seen across an expanse of dark water. A small rowboat is just arriving at a water gate and seawall on shore. An oarsman maneuvers the boat from the stern. In the bow, facing the gate, is a standing figure clad entirely in white. Just behind the figure is a white, festooned object commonly interpreted as a coffin. The tiny islet is dominated by a dense grove of tall, dark cypress trees — associated by long-standing tradition with cemeteries and mourning — which is closely hemmed in by precipitous cliffs. Furthering the funerary theme are what appear to be sepulchral portals and windows penetrating the rock faces. The overall impression conveyed by the imagery is one of both hopeless desolation and tense expectation.

Böcklin himself provided no public explanation as to the meaning of the painting, though he did describe it as “a dream picture: it must produce such a stillness that one would be awed by a knock on the door.” The title, which was conferred upon it by the art dealer Fritz Gurlitt in 1883, was not specified by Böcklin, though it does derive from a phrase in an 1880 letter he sent to the painting's original commissioner. Not knowing the history of the early versions of the painting (see below), many observers have interpreted the oarsman as representing the boatman Charon who conducted souls to the underworld in Greek mythology. The water would then be either the River Styx or the River Acheron and his white-clad passenger a recently deceased soul transiting to the afterlife.

Origins and inspiration

Greek island Pondikonisi near Corfu was likely the inspiration for the painting. *Isle of the Dead* evokes, in part, the English Cemetery in Florence, Italy, where the first three versions were painted. The cemetery was close to Böcklin's studio and was also where his infant daughter Maria was buried. (In all, Böcklin lost 8 of his 14 children.)

The model for the rocky islet was likely Pondikonisi, a small island near Corfu which is adorned with a small chapel amid a cypress grove. (Another, less likely candidate is the island of Ponza in the Tyrrhenian Sea.)



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Versions

Böcklin completed the first version of the painting in May 1880 for his patron Alexander Günther, but kept it himself. In April 1880, while still working on it, Böcklin's Florence studio had been visited by Marie Berna (widow of financier Dr. Georg von Berna [1836-65] and soon-to-be wife of the German politician Waldemar, Count of Oriola [1854-1910]). She was struck by the first version of this "dream image" (now in the Kunstmuseum Basel), which sat half completed on the easel, so Böcklin painted a smaller version on wood for her (now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City). At Berna's request, he added the coffin and female figure, in allusion to her husband's death of diphtheria years earlier. Subsequently, he added these elements to the earlier painting. He called these works Die Gräberinsel ("Tomb Island"). Sometimes the "Basel" version is credited as the first one, sometimes the "New York".

The third version was painted in 1883 for Böcklin's dealer Fritz Gurlitt. Beginning with this version, one of the burial chambers in the rocks on the right bears Böcklin's own initials: "A.B.". (In 1933, this version was put up for sale and a noted Böcklin admirer, Adolf Hitler, acquired it. He hung it first at the Berghof in Obersalzberg and, then after 1940, in the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin. It is now at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.)

Financial imperatives resulted in a fourth version in 1884, which was ultimately acquired by the entrepreneur and art collector Baron Heinrich Thyssen and hung at his Berliner Bank subsidiary. It was burned after a bomb attack during World War II and survives only as a black-and-white photograph.

A fifth version was commissioned in 1886 by the Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig, where it still hangs.



Isle of Life, 1888

In 1888, Böcklin created a painting called Die Lebensinsel ("Isle of Life"). Probably intended as an antipole to the Isle of the Dead, it also shows a small island, but with all signs of joy and life. Together with the first version of the Isle of the Dead, this painting is part of the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel.

The five versions

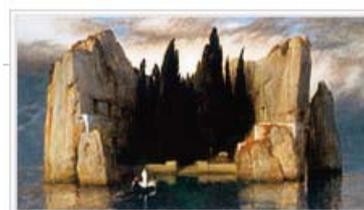
1. May 1880 - Oil on canvas; 111 x 115 cm; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum, Basel.
2. June 1880 - Oil on board; 74 x 122 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Reisinger Fund, New York.
3. 1883 - Oil on board; 80 x 150 cm; Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
4. 1884 - Oil on copper; 81 x 151 cm; destroyed in Rotterdam during World War II.
5. 1886 - Oil on board; 80 x 150 cm; Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig.



Isle of the Dead: "Basel" version, 1880



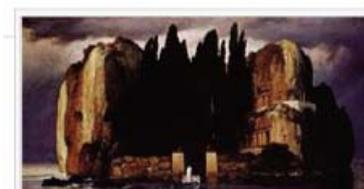
Isle of the Dead: "New York" version, 1880



Isle of the Dead: Third version, 1883



Isle of the Dead: Fourth Version, 1884
(black-and-white photograph)



Isle of the Dead: Fifth version, 1886



Greek island Pondikonisi near Corfu was likely the inspiration for the painting

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