

BEYOND HAMMER
BRITISH HORROR CINEMA SINCE 1970
BY
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DEDICATIONS

This book is dedicated to Joan Lees and my English teachers Mrs. MacDonald and Mr. Davies.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When writing a book about any period of cinema history, omissions have to be made. Be this due to space, time or relevance, some films that others would consider essential to such critiques are either briefly mentioned or left out entirely. Such is the case with this book. This is not due to those works being of a lesser quality than those included but more to the concept of the book itself: the intention is to present to student, tutor and the casual reader a sample of the depth and transitions evident with the history of the British horror film. As such films were selected that would explore specific moments, qualities and readings in order to provide a chronology of this often maligned part of British cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

Dominating British horror cinema is, perhaps predictably, Hammer Studios: in 1968, the studio was honoured with the Queen's Award for Industry in recognition for the role they had so far played in raising the profile of British cinema on both a national and international scale. Five years later and the golden age of Hammer would be over, taking with it the last vestiges of the Great British Horror Film whilst the rest of the British film industry struggled with minimal state funding and the withdrawal of American financing. Through her analysis of the era, Sarah Street notes that apart from the lack of financial support, 'cinema admissions were declining at the same time as the popularity of television and other amusements increased, a trend the arrival of multiplexes in the mid-1970s could not reverse' (1997: 93). From here the British film industry, one that had flourished both critically and commercially only a decade earlier, began its steady decline whilst attempting to reconstruct itself through the period / costume dramas before shifting its concerns into more contemporary narratives.

THE PAST

Hammer's output is often considered as a unique body of film production, one marked by the *auteurist* stamp not of the director but of the studio itself: the historic location that is drenched in Gothic signifiers, mist shrouded landscapes, period costumes, heroic males and monstrous women all presided over by the classic literary manifestations of Count Dracula and Victor Frankenstein. So bound to these motifs, Hammer is synonymous with renderings of the Gothic to the extent that its contextual and conceptual concerns are sometimes lost and often overlooked.

In her brief chronology of Hammer's output of this era, Street notes that 'in the 1960s there were significant developments which drew on conventions established by Hammer yet at the same time incorporated new stylistic trends and reflected contemporary anxieties' (ibid.). These anxieties were predominately focused on an increasing sense of male insecurity and its manifestation through the abuse of the independent woman¹. Such concerns were rising out of a British society where women were establishing themselves within the nation's work force, simultaneously fragmenting the established family order and undermining the perceived masculine role as the family's prime income generator. Horror, with its dominating male heroes and its weak female victims, became an ideal platform within which to express these concerns, a situation made all the more contentious as the censorship system relaxed enough to allow for an increase in nudity and scenes of sexual intimacy.

ORIGINS

Although the emergence of cultural concerns and anxieties is blatantly evident in

CHAPTER I: THE VAMPIRE LOVERS



'As the 1970s dawned, the British film industry was in crisis mode yet again, only this time it would prove terminal. The American majors, who... throughout the latter part of the 1960s had lavished money on British production, were registering massive financial losses at home and accordingly withdrew their support.' (Rigby, 2002: 196)

At the turn of the decade the British Board of Film Censors began to redress the boundaries of the censorship system. As a consequence, Secretary John Trevelyan increased the entry age for an X certificate to 18 years and at the same time introduced a new certificate, the AA, whose lower age limit was 14 years. Instead of seeing this change as detrimental to film production, British studios, executives, writers and directors saw it as an opportunity to increase the graphic content of their films. The revised X became an opportunity to depict stronger acts of violence, to show more nudity and to depict with more clarity sexual contact and the sex act itself. As a consequence, 'British horror films were now progressing to exploitative details which would have been unimaginable only five years before. Hammer led the way with a film which was emblematic not only of the relaxed censorship but also of the American desertion of Britain's sinking studios' (Rigby, 2002: 197). That film was *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970).

As if to make their exploitative intentions blatantly clear, screenwriter Tudor Gates and director Roy Ward Baker, opened their film by deceiving the audience into believing they are watching another classic Hammer vampire film: a shrouded figure drifts out of a fog-wreathed graveyard. As this entity floats forward it slowly transforms into a woman in a diaphanous gown. She heads towards the remains of a castle where a man, Baron Joachim von Hartog (Douglas Wilmer), waits. They embrace – and here is where the break with Hammer tradition is first signalled. As they embrace the woman's ample cleavage crushes against the Baron's crucifix (Fig. 1). She screams as the metal burns into her flesh, her lips pulling back to reveal her fangs. She lunges for the Baron's throat but he is quick and, drawing his sword, he swiftly decapitates her with a single stroke of his blade.



Fig. 1: Cleavage and the Cross

This brief but violent death draws together three potent images – the crucifix, breasts and decapitation – into one powerful sequence that is simultaneously seductive, erotic and ugly. In this one vampire's death, Baker coherently encapsulates Hammer's new approach to horror and by doing so marked the beginning of the studio's steady decline into exploitation territory.

This opening deception is two-fold. Not only does it function as this marker in the shift in tone from classic horror to exploitation, it also marks a considerable generic shift in the power of the vampire. Up until the release of *The Vampire Lovers*, the majority of cinematic vampires were constructed around a series of established rules: as unholy creatures they fear both sunlight and the symbolic power of the Cross, they drink the blood of the innocent, and can be killed either by a stake through the heart or through decapitation. Baker's opening sequence draws all of these facets again into one and so suggests to the audience that the vampires of this film are going to be within a traditional mode. But, as the narrative unfolds, it soon becomes apparent that these vampires are far from those of the established cinematic mode.

ORIGINS: THE VAMPIRE

Since its first appearance in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), the vampire has enjoyed a sustained cinematic profile. The reason for this is, as Odell and Le Blanc suggest in their book *Vampire Cinema*, that as a symbol the vampire can be successfully 'reinvented and rediscovered by each generation to mirror their fears and desires' (2000: 7). It is the vampire's very mutability as a symbol that sustains it: Murnau's *Nosferatu* can be read as a metaphorical reflection of 'the prevalent anti-Semitic attitudes of Weimar Germany or... perhaps the vampire's abject and terrifying qualities mirrored Murnau's sense of ostracism as a gay man in that place and time' (Goldberg, 2007: 168). Seventy years later, Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and Neil Jordan's *Interview with a Vampire*