

Hammer's Dracula is now a beloved British institution

Sinclair McKay hails the re-release of the 1958 Christopher Lee classic — showing at the British Film Institute — and asks why this version of the vampire legend is so treasured

To some, the spectacle of heaving bosoms, goblets and hideous bloodshot eyes might simply signify an average night out in Boujis. For the rest of us, however, these are the amusingly persistent leitmotifs of Hammer Horror — together with brightly lit Transylvanian inns, horses clattering through Home Counties woodlands, huge fangs and glass paintings of distant castles.

Cinema horror these days is largely to do with gruellingly repulsive scenes of realistic torture — from the *Hostel* films to the *Saw* series. So how is it that the now-antiquated scare devices of a gimcrack British outfit of the 1950s and 1960s remain so extraordinarily pervasive?

This Halloween, that original Hammer *Dracula* (1958), directed by Terence Fisher, is to get a special celebratory screening at the National Film Theatre — followed by the film being re-released in cinemas nationwide. The British Film Institute has lovingly tarted up the old print, bringing out a freshly vibrant colour and giving James Bernard's brilliant pulsing musical score extra oomph. As Kate Bush so accurately sang in 1978: 'Hammer Horror — won't leave it alone!' But why won't we?

It's quite hard to imagine now, but when Hammer, a tiny film studio operating out of a Thames-side country house in Berkshire, decided to branch into gothic some 50 years ago with *The Curse of Frankenstein*, its horror movies — the first in colour, and the first to feature showy splashes of blood — were initially felt to be the shocking limit of cinematic brutality. Censors and critics gagged. Audiences accordingly piled into the cinemas, here and in the US, eager to be sickened. But the blood — a curious shade of pinkish red — would not have fooled a stoat.

And time tames and softens. After the first shockwave of the 1950s, Hammer's subsequent parade of mummies, man-made monsters, assorted vampires (and even, on one occasion, a Gorgon), came to dominate the genre worldwide until the 1970s. They were viewed fondly as a daft night out for gum-chewing teenagers. Then the serious Hammer cult began; fans and film academics alike began poring over these 'texts' and discussing themes of 'bourgeois splendour vs decay and death'. Quite so. And now Hammer Horror has completed its metamorphosis into bona fide grown-up arthouse material.

To be fair, that original 1958 *Dracula* is, in Hammer terms, the daddy. There's Peter

Cushing as flinty Van Helsing, with a Gladstone bag full of crucifixes and stakes — the climactic battle between him and the Count, complete with golden candlesticks, is a classic of the genre; and of course, the complete Count himself, Christopher Lee — handsome baritone aristocrat one moment, blazing-eyed demon the next. It is so innocent and silly, it is sublime.



Fangs for the memories: Christopher Lee as Count Dracula

These old Hammers, with their bright colour, ingenious set designs and full-on monsters, were grown-up fairy tales that left impressions too vivid to be erased. But other generations were given different nightmares. In 1931 we had Bela Lugosi, who played the Count with a goulash-thick accent — his attempts at longer lines took up half the film's running time. In 1943, a hulking Lon Chaney Jr made an unlikely ethereal bloodsucker in *Son of Dracula*. Gary Oldman in the 1992 Francis Ford Coppola version gave the character a touching romanticism, as well as some of the strangest hairdos ever committed to celluloid.

For aficionados, the really properly scary version is F.W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*, made without permission from Bram Stoker's estate, and almost lost when legal action required all prints to be destroyed. Starring the improbably named Max Schreck, this was verminous vampire as plague-carrier, moving through an eerie twilight middle-Europe in silence, his spidery shadow unforgettably creeping up the heroine's staircase.

Equally stunning in aesthetic terms, but rare-

ly seen now, is Carl Dreyer's extraordinary *Vampyr* (1932), with its sinisterly unaccountable shadows and bleached-out nightmare sequences. This was the vampire movie that prefigured the whole of David Lynch's career: a masterpiece in the *Unheimlich*.

One of the many who seem puzzled by the continuing fascination of Hammer is Christopher Lee himself. The six sequels that he made as the Count brought him little pleasure. Including the one that transported Dracula to the swinging King's Road of 1972. He prefers not to talk about the role now. Remember Lee for anything — *Lord of the Rings*, *The Wicker Man*, the James Bond villain with three nipples — but not this. Conversely, the 1958 film's screenwriter Jimmy Sangster — a rather brilliant old pro — is tickled by the whole thing. I turn to him for advice. Why has the film attracted arthouse adoration? 'Don't ask me,' Sangster says. 'I wrote a script, based on a novel, reducing the storyline because we had less than 90 minutes to tell the story and very little money to make the picture.' He points out that in the novel, Dracula sailed to Whitby. The Count didn't in the Hammer version because they couldn't afford a boat.

In fairness to Sangster, though, the film still works today because it is an expert piece of taut adaptation — Stoker's 400 pages clock in at 84 minutes. And in giving the film that sheer pace and urgency — previously horror had been a rather stagey genre — Sangster and Fisher set the Hammer house-style in stone.

Oh, and then of course there was the sex. For 1958 — and certainly after years of deodorised Rank productions — it was relatively brazen and perverse. It was here that Hammer first gave us the heroine in a nightie, lying back on her bed with a hint of a smile, waiting for the appearance of her undead paramour in the frame of her French windows.

Indeed, it was this scenario — sauce and death in equal proportions — that the studio managed to keep going with remarkable consistency across dozens of films before Hollywood hit back with *The Exorcist* (1973) and suddenly made period horror look dated.

Sangster also points out that low budget films were never made to last. The idea was simply to 'get a good opening few weeks and everyone would have been happy. The fact that these films are still hanging in there,' he adds, 'is to me, as it would have been to Terry, inexplicable.'

But actually, there is an explanation. Rather like Ealing Studios, Hammer created its own world; an appealing fantasy land of inns and gothic turrets and wanton women and gold crucifixes and snarling aristocrats. In other words, unlike the comfortless nihilistic horrors that fill the multiplexes today, Hammer was — and in some curious way, still is — the very definition of escapism.

There will be Halloween preview screenings of Dracula on 31 October at BFI IMAX and Cineworld venues nationwide. The film goes on general release on 2 November. Sinclair McKay is the author of A Thing of Unspeakable Horror (Aurum Press).