

SATANIC PANIC!

THE DEVIL ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Week 4: When I saw, it was a time for a change...

The Devil Rides Out (1968)

- Screenplay Richard Matheson (*I am legend*, *The Shrinking Man* etc.)
- Brilliant British cast including Christopher Lee and Charles Gray
- Based on Dennis Wheatley's book
- Moves away from 'Victorian Gothic'
- Has a level of seriousness in its dealings with black magic

"The Devil Rides Out represents the (same sort of) high point for Hammer. It was a moment when director, screenwriter and actors were all in perfect agreement about the deadly earnestness of the story. Because a young family is involved, the stakes are that much higher; and Christopher Lee clearly adores every minute of being, for once, the authoritative good guy and delivers all his lines, as opposed to refusing to speak any of them at all."

Sinclair McKay

"...Terence Fisher and Hammer made a superb job of it. I was delighted. It was a new venture for everybody, and it came off. It did well then, and it had a strong reprise in a cult revival. The terrible vibrations of evil were clearly felt. It was right to scare people, to put them off the sinister dangers implicit in dabbling with black magic."

Christopher Lee

Christopher Lee, perhaps, bored with his diminishing Dracula roles, took this one very seriously.

"I appointed myself black [magic] technical adviser"

Christopher Lee

Hammer had had the rights to *The Devil Rides Out* for some time but held off fearing a backlash of controversy/censorship.

British Horror and the Occult

"...the tide has turned in Crowley's favour. The doctrine of 'Do What Thou Wilt' with its encouragement to trample the gods under foot and to take one's fill of love, wine and 'strange drugs', has seized the imagination of this restless world."

John Symonds

Second Phase (1966-1976)

- *The Witches* (1966)
- *The Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *The Devil Rides Out* (1968)
- *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971)
- *The Wicker Man* (1973)
- *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976)

- Whilst there had been examples of British Horror films depicting 'magic' as being from 'somewhere else'
- *Plague of Zombies* – Haiti
- *Night of the Eagle* – Jamaica

- By the 70s the magic/witchcraft/occult was planted firmly in the British (usually English) rural settings.

“Within the British occult film, there are three strands of particular significance”

Leon Hunt

1. ‘...the way the figure of Crowley translates into popular representations of the libertine and ‘black magician’
2. ‘...the figure of the female witch’
3. ‘...the conflict between old and new religions’

Tigon

If film company Hammer with its custom brand of Technicolor gothic is the undisputed king of UK-based scary movies, then the kitchen sink chills of Amicus can be seen as a creepy pretender to that throne. Both outfits gave us very different-looking houses of horror. The former offered lavish period dramas, castle-bound retellings of classic stories swathed in velvet, cobwebs, and dripping with Kensington gore, while the latter often presented on-location, modern-day tales with disconcerting twists, making anthology shocks its stock in trade. But it was another company, Tigon, often overlooked by mainstream critics that, would provide some of the choicest examples of British genre filmmaking between the late 60s and early 70s. With *The Sorcerers* (1967) directed by Michael Reeves, the burgeoning company was able to properly lay out its stall. The fact that they had blagged bona fide screen legend Boris Karloff to star, showed that they were not just a mere Hammer or Amicus knock-off, they were genuinely bringing something unsettlingly different to that antique candlelit table. This is not to say that they didn’t know their market, and would use every trick to try and play credible rival to its main competitors. Not only did they bring back Karloff in the later *Curse of the Crimson Altar* they also brought Vincent Price into the fold with *Witchfinder General* (1973). However, *The Sorcerers* had been officially released under the corporate name Tony Tenser Films Ltd.

The organization was only able to fully come out as Tigon Film Productions, (making as well as distributing movies) with its first properly sanctioned release, *The Blood Beast Terror* (1968).

- The occult = sex
- Were keen to link sexploitation to the world of occult cinema
- *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968)
- *Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971)

Witchfinder General (1968)

- *Witchfinder* redefined the term ‘costume horror’
- This proved lethal to Hammer, who had always used ‘the costume’ to create a distance between ‘gory gothic horror’ and its contemporary audience
- With *Witchfinder*, there was no distance.

“...the contemporary camera work, and the edgy sparseness of the script and the performances, this was ninety minutes of comfortless violence.”

Sinclair McKay

- Hopkins (Price) arrives at a small rural community to investigate accusations of witchcraft
- Hopkins, an opportunist takes advantage of the breakdown of social order to create a reign of terror...

The Witch and *Witchfinder General*

- A focal point for the logic of misogyny'
- 'An enemy of the implacable order'
- 'As representative of male anxiety and/or female power'
- 'Witch Cinema' – largely deals with two ideas – that of the lone, wronged witch seeking vengeance or the cult or community
- "...the film is not interested in witches' – **Leon Hunt**
- "its real conflict is between men" – **Hutchings**

"...there was no supernatural element – it is horrifyingly clear from the off that Matthew Hopkins' 'witches' are very obviously, no such thing, and that the young women and clerics of Suffolk are falling victim to the vile 'interrogation techniques' of a brilliant rabble-rousing sadist"

Sinclair McKay

Critical Response

*"The best film he (Michael Reeves) made in England generates a power which scarcely diminishes with repeated viewing; though almost compromised by interference (censorship), *Witchfinder General* is unlike anything else that was being done at the time and has been done since."*

David Pirie

"...audiences are left feeling a terrible mix of nausea and gloom. It is the very opposite of escapism. Romance is a helpless, delicate thing in this pitiless, filthy world. As a vision of pure inhumanity, in fact, there is little else to match it in the history of cinema."

Sinclair McKay

"The film gave the impression that it was exploiting violence, and in particular, sadism for commercial reasons."

John Trevelyan (BBFC)

...a myth that portrays women as nothing but helpless victims of patriarchy"

Diane Purkiss

***Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971)**

- Early 18th Century
- A deformed skull is discovered – it has an intact eye and strange fur
- The skull then disappears
- The village becomes afflicted by its supernatural power
- Children find a claw, begin to behave strangely – fur starts to grow on their bodies...

*"The film was not for tender stomachs, with its scenes of amputation and the clinical dissection – courtesy of Eddie Knight's make-up-of a patch of 'Devil's skin' from the leg of a young girl, as surgical in its way as *Franju's Eyes Without a Face* (Les Yeux Sans Visage) had been in 1959."*

Alan Frank

"Blood on Satan's Claw is an intoxicating, if not entirely coherent, blend of rural horror, generational conflict and bleakness...the film was very much a product of conflicting agendas."

Leon Hunt

Robert Wynne-Simmons (writer)

- ‘...the inherent evil of children and the overt sexuality of evil’
- ‘...the stamping out of old religions...by an atheistic belief that all sorts of things must be blocked out of the mind...a dogged enlightenment.’
- Though set in the 18th century – Robert Wynne-Simmons had modern influences in mind – Altamont, the Manson Murder, Mary Bell

“...but in Blood on Satan’s Claw their violence is turned against each other rather than on literal or figurative parents. They are shown to be ecstatically nihilistic rather than directly engaged in a generational struggle, as though the film is keen to deter any potential identification with them.”

Leon Hunt

- Tigon were pushing to make the Judge more conventionally ‘heroic’
- Robert Wynne Simmons didn’t agree – his idea was to show the resurrected demon be shown to be ‘more alive’ than the Judge – showing that his ideas and viewpoints were ‘dead’ – emphasising the battle between the old religions and new thinking
- The original script was intended as an ‘Amicus style’ portmanteau feature, which possibly explains the film’s slightly disjointed feel.