

The Charm of Evil

“And it was at that age that poetry arrived
in search of me”—Pablo Neruda

I was seven when horror came in search of me. I'd seen it from afar: garish comic-strip representations of Dracula on Valentine picture postcards, glimpses of men standing around in misty graveyards in late-night films I wasn't allowed to watch. But when I was seven, my father gave me a book, the Ladybird Horror Classic abridgment of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. I devoured its words and handsome illustrations eagerly, and from that moment forward, horror had me firmly in its clutch. Those pocket-sized hardbacks of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *The Mummy* were my initiation into the realms of the genre.

Not long afterwards, I spotted a film of the same name while scouring the TV Times. I'd read a horror book and now had one foot in a dimension hitherto open only to older children and grown-ups, but would my dad let me watch a horror *movie*? To my astonishment and delight, he did. That the film was over 40 years old, in black and white, and mild by eighties' standards did not bother this horror-hungry young mind: The characters I had seen only in ink on a page were alive on the screen in my own living room.

It might sound impressive if I said it were Stevenson's exposé of the duality in man and the darkness in all of us that resonated with me, but in truth the film's allure was as plain as this: images of horror. It was Spencer Tracy's eyes darting left and right as he rose from a park bench bent on a spree of terror; it was the chilling nonchalance of Tracy's Hyde as he played the piano and spat grape seeds on the floor while Ingrid Bergman's Ivy cowered behind him; it was the uncontrolled glee on Hyde's face as he battered his victim to death with his cane; it was his shadowy figure disappearing into the London fog, his cloak flapping behind him.

This introduction to horror was the beginning of an obsession. I scoured the TV guides weekly to discover what new horror films awaited me, and I made a ritual of waking in the early hours, before school, to watch a video recording of the previous night's ghoulish offering. My dedication soon paid off in the most sacred experience of them all: my first Hammer film.

It was roughly 1986, and the film was *Dracula*, back in the day when the title card actually read "Dracula," in that beautifully ornate typeface, instead of the US title "Horror of Dracula." I can visualize how its listing appeared in the pages of the *Radio Times* – I even remember there was a science documentary on the same night, and a photograph of outer space dominated the page. Seemingly minor details linger in the mind after such hallowed occasions as a Hammer devotee's first Hammer horror. But the major details linger even stronger: Seeing for the first time Dracula's disintegration as Van Helsing forces him into the sunlight; I experienced it several times over, thanks to the wonders of rewind.

The following year was the 30th anniversary of Hammer's first Gothic horror film, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, and the BBC commemorated it with a documentary, *Hammer: The Studio That Dripped Blood*, and a season of Hammer weekend double-bills. *Dracula*, *Prince of Darkness* was paired with *The Evil of Frankenstein*, *The Nanny* with *Rasputin*, *the Mad Monk*. If *Dracula* was my conversion to Hammer, by this time I was a committed disciple. As I grew older, I would familiarize myself with the entire canon of Hammer horror films, acquainting myself intimately with Dracula, Frankenstein, zombies, werewolves, mummies and all manner of reptilian monster. Later, I read David Pirie's seminal *A Heritage of Horror* and approached the films on another, more adult, level.

That's not to say I wasn't for turning. There was a period in my late teens when, as an evangelical in the religious sense, I became convinced I could not reconcile my love of Hammer films with my Christian faith. Full of zeal for Christ, I scrubbed my Hammer titles and vowed not to return to them – but I did. The lure of Hammer was too strong. When I had eventually left behind my naïve

fundamentalist enthusiasm, Hammer was there waiting for me. Horror found me again.

An obsession with horror, like any obsession, especially those that seized us while we were young, takes on evangelical overtones for those it holds. It becomes the source of visions, by day and by night (I have visited Bray Studios, the home of Hammer Films from 1951 to 1966, at least a dozen times in my dreams). It becomes the chief element of rituals, like my dawn ritual of watching Hammer, wearing the ceremonial robe of my bed sheet or duvet. Other followers become brothers and sisters, fellow devotees who understand the magic lost on outsiders.

As I think about my devotion, I realize it brings a kind of comfort to me. My preferred manner of settling down to a Hammer horror is still laying down, shrouded in blankets. To revisit a cherished Hammer movie is to cosy up with something familiar, something safe that belongs to a tradition I have valued since childhood.

The director Terence Fisher, the Hammer pioneer who made *Dracula*, *The Curse of Frankenstein* and well over a dozen other films for the company, envisaged evil not as ugly and repulsive, but as attractive. Biographer Winston Wheeler-Dixon termed this theme “the charm of evil.” It was this charm, working its powers through Dracula’s hypnotic glare and Baron Frankenstein’s cold and reckless pursuit of power over life and death, that seduced me almost three decades ago – and of which I remain its willing captive.

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