
SATANIC PANIC!

THE DEVIL ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Week 2: What's puzzling you is the nature of my game...

Jekyll and Hyde on Screen

Between 1908-1920 no less than 10 versions of the story were produced, however it is the later pre-code era version which is arguably the strongest take on the Robert Louis Stevenson novella.

Motion Picture Production Code

The Golden Age of Hollywood can roughly be split into two eras – the post and pre-code. In the early 20s, after a series of scandals and high profile cases including the Roscoe Arbuckle court case, film studios, under increasing political pressure, decided to regulate themselves. Under the guidance of William Hays a list of 'Don'ts' and 'Be Carefuls' was introduced.

The 'self-regulation' of the industry was deemed as being unsuccessful though. Under Jason Joy and later Dr James Wingate, any attempts to control or block more salacious material proved ineffective and without due enthusiasm for the task. *The Blue Angel* (1930) for instance, was released without cuts much to the disdain of Californian censors who branded the film 'indecent'. However, under the control of new head Joseph Breen there was an amendment to the code which meant that films could not be released unless they had at first received a certificate of approval.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1932)

- Contained (for the time) strong sexual content
- The violence and abuse caused by Hyde against mainly female victims is still quite shocking even by today's standards
- But though there is more explicit imagery than other films from the same period, it is perhaps what is implied which carries the greater force
- The themes of inner demons and duality are handled incredibly well
- Frederic March makes for a complex Jekyll and a terrifying Hyde

Jekyll and the Devil

- When Jekyll first talks about the duality he and his companion stop under a pawnbroker shop – suggesting a deal of sorts
- When he kills Ivy, we focus in on the statue of an angel – Ivy is the fallen angel, yet also could be seen as a nod to Satan
- The boiling pot on the fire at the end is a visual depicter of Hell – Jekyll's final resting place

Night of the Demon (1957)

- Though the original M.R. James text *Casting the Runes* was under twenty pages long, screen writer Charles Bennet saw in it enough potential to buy the rights.
- However, he later sold them to former *East Side Kids* child star, Chester E Hall.
- Bennet quickly regretted the sale when shortly afterwards he was approached by RKO who were interested in developing the project, with he as director.

After some changes in casting, switching out actors Robert Taylor and Dick Powell for Nial MacGinnis and Dana Andrews, and Jacques Tourneur bought in as director, the project, originally titled *The Bewitched* and later *The Haunted*, went into production.

Jacques Tourneur

Tourneur, one time Val Lewton collaborator and director of spooky RKO pictures like *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *The Leopard Man* (1943) and of course the creepy, noirish stone cold classic *Cat People* (1942), was perfect to oversee the uneasy thriller. Like Lewton, he understood the need to exploit the ‘unseen horror’, the horrible thing which lurks tantalisingly off-screen yet lingers at the forefront of our imagination.

Look and Feel

As well as being inspired by the M.R. James story, *Night of the Demon*, an Anglo-US production, also seems to tap into something deeper, a very British style of the uncanny, which encompasses much about the Island’s history, make-up and esoteric nature. Littered as it is with its string of English and Irish character actors like Peggy Cummins, Brian Wilde and Maurice Denham, it’s black and white mise-en-scene populated by terrace houses, crumbling farm buildings and the shadow of Stonehenge imbue it with a darkly folkloric, druidic and mysterious Celtic magic.

Karswell and Crowley

The main baddie Julian Karswell brilliantly realised by Nial MacGinnis is unambiguously and unapologetically an Aliester Crowley like figure. Crowley, an English occultist, magician, poet and painter, undoubtedly had a bent for the theatrical. Often photographed in outlandish costume, the highly charismatic character who advised his followers to ‘Do what thou wilt’ for a time became both a fascination and reviled target of hate in a more genteel Edwardian age.

And it’s perhaps not too much of a stretch to say there are certainly echoes of Karswell’s grease-paint smeared mad man, in the recent Tod Phillip’s *Joker* (2019). Joaquin Phoenix’s shabby make-up wearing psychopath definitely carries more than a hint of Karswell about him, particularly in his odd relationship with his housebound mother and his unquestionable love of spectacle.

Common Motifs

Night of the Demon’s appeal of course lies in its brooding terror, the creeping dread which begins to overcome one-time non-believer Holden, as it dawns on him that his fatal curse may be real. In a sense this is where we see M.R. James’s more direct influence. The idea of an ordinary man of science or academia being overwhelmed by supernatural forces, rendering their whole existence meaningless, is a motif the writer often played with again and again.

The Demon

Much has been said about the demon which manifests at the beginning and end of the feature, famously director Tourneur had voiced his concerns over Chester E Hall’s post production addition of the monster, and original screenwriter Bennet even went as far as announcing:

“If Chester walked up my driveway now, I’d shoot him dead.”
Jacques Tourneur

Originally in Bennet’s script the ‘monster’ was meant to be shown purely as the plume of smoke we see pouring out of nowhere.

Originally, stop-motion monster expert Ray Harryhausen had been sought to provide the required effects, however he was already deep into the production of his 'Dynamation' classic *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) and was unable to offer his services. But what we do get has become a strangely iconic monster image. The famous close-up of the demon's face, with its horns, pointy ears and flaming fangs, has pretty much taken up a life of its own, almost becoming a shorthand symbol for occultist horror films.

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Release

Released in the UK in December nineteen fifty-seven and despite the wider belief that it went out uncut in Britain in its original ninety-six-minute version, it was actually shown as part of a double bill with *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957) and like its American *Curse of the Demon* counterpart which was shown as support feature to *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), it was also trimmed down to eighty-one minutes. The confusion comes from the fact that occasionally it would be shown as a standalone piece at its original length.

Tourneur's M.R. James adaptation though, remains a cult favourite, a sublimely devastating story which manages to sidestep any attempts to imbue it with distorting influence. Despite its tiny visual flaws, it is a remarkably accomplished, stylish piece of work, which mixes unsettling psychodrama with British folk horror in a hugely entertaining thoughtful, achingly intelligent package. Like Karswell, the makers of *Night of the Demon* gambled with a different kind of horror and summoned something dark and magical.

Night of the Eagle (1962)

Though a British production, it was distributed by AIP (American International Pictures), the mastermind of Samuel Z. Arkoff

'The Arkoff Formula'

- Action (exciting, entertaining drama)
- Revolution (novel or controversial themes and ideas)
- Killing (a modicum of violence)
- Oratory (notable dialogue and speeches)
- Fantasy (acted-out fantasies common to the audience)
- Fornication (sex appeal), for young adults)

Night of the Eagle is an example of a 'nominally' British production which fell into the first wave of home-grown occult cinema.

First Phase (1957-1964)

"...it emerges as a counter-tradition to the dominant Hammer Gothic in its play on the unseen and un-representable."

Leon Hunt

'Nominally British'

- Director/Writer/Actors imported from US
- Black and white 'expressionist' photography
- An emphasis on 'mood' and 'suggestion' over graphic horror