



After the “golden age” of the 1940’s, British cinema in the 50’s is often viewed as timid, complacent, and, thematically and stylistically, as conservative.

One of the most popular genres of the period was the war film. ‘The Cruel Sea’, ‘The Dam Busters’, ‘Reach for the Sky’ and ‘Ice Cold in Alex’ were the top box-office attractions of their year. David Lean’s ‘The Bridge on the River Kwai’ was the British cinema’s biggest international success of the decade. The films examine British values, emotions and notions of heroism and masculinity and are not simply nostalgic representations of former national greatness.

The other popular genre in the 1950’s was comedy. A number of classic films emerged from Ealing Studios - ‘The Lavender Hill Mob’, ‘The Man in the White Suit’ and ‘The Ladykillers’ all featuring Britain’s finest actor-star of the time, Alec Guinness. However, Ealing ceased production in 1958, and its understated comedy was ultimately replaced in the cinema audience’s affection by the exuberant coarseness of the Carry-On films. National cinema enjoyed an unprecedented popularity amongst home audiences. In 1959 the top twelve box-office films in Britain, which included the Boulting Brothers’ ‘I’m All Right Jack,’ were all actually made in Britain - something never since repeated.

Hammer Films, although founded in 1934, were best known for their series of Gothic horror and fantasy films made from the mid-1950s onwards, bringing eroticism and excess to a cinema more often associated with repression and restraint.

Hammer’s first experiment with the horror genre in 1955 was with their adaptation of Nigel Kneale’s BBC Television science fiction serial ‘The Quatermass Experiment,’ directed by Val Guest. The success led to ‘The Curse of Frankenstein’ released in 1957, directed by Terence Fisher, loosely based on the 1818 novel ‘Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus’ by Mary Shelley, which paired Peter Cushing as Baron Victor Frankenstein and Christopher Lee as The Creature.

The films’ tremendous financial success prompted Hammer to commission an adaptation of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel ‘Dracula’; with Fisher again directing. This was the first of many Hammer films to star Cushing as Doctor Van Helsing and Lee as Count Dracula. Each of the eight Dracula sequels features either Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing, though not necessarily together.

The plot sees Count Dracula aiming to exact revenge on the relatives of Jonathan Harker who tried to kill him, with only vampire hunter Dr. Van Helsing equipped to hunt down the predatory villain. The film was cut for its original cinema release by the British Board of Film Classification in 1958 in order to remove shots of blood during Lucy's staking and to reduce the final disintegration of Dracula.

Fisher's 'Dracula' reworks the popular clichés of John Balderston's 1920s stage adaptation and the 1930s Universal films cemented by Bela Lugosi's portrayal: Dracula's opera cape, his thick accent and his exaggerated romantic image. Lee portrays Dracula as a charming, well-spoken aristocrat, foregrounding Dracula myth's and its sexual elements. Lee's first entrance, greeting Jonathan Harker from the top of a long staircase, deliberately echoes the Count's introduction in Tod Browning's film.

Fisher directs with a tremendous sense of atmosphere, pace and storytelling, making full use of attractive sets (by Bernard Robinson) and quite an unreal color palette which utilized Eastman color (Technicolor) cinematography by Jack Asher to great effect.

While the films were not a critical success, audiences flocked to see them. They were the first horror films in color, shocking in their own way and destined to become a British cinema staple.