

Demystifying Hammer: The Influence of Transnational Hollywood Financing

Peter Arne Johnson

Volume 4, october 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102254ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102254ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Johnson, P. A. (2021). Demystifying Hammer: The Influence of Transnational Hollywood Financing. *Monstrum*, 4, 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102254ar>

© Peter Arne Johnson, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Demystifying Hammer

The Influence of Transnational Hollywood Financing

Peter Arne Johnson

Various cultural approaches to Hammer Film Productions, the British production company best known for its mid-century Gothic horror pictures and rich house style, contextualize it within post-war British culture and suggest that its primary historical significance lies in its subtextual ideologies that are uniquely “British.” Scholars like Peter Hutchings and David Pirie, for example, explore how Hammer’s early horror and sci-fi output allegorically betray cultural issues in the United Kingdom during the post-war period, including critiques of imperiled British masculinity amid second-wave feminism and refractions of labor union tensions (Hutchings 1993, 45; Pirie 1973, 38). Although some approaches to Hammer focus on the cultural aspects of the institution and its texts, this paper aims to bridge the gap between the cultural significance of Hammer’s cinematic products and the minutiae of film financing in order to foreground the interrelationship between economic structures and culture. Hutchings (1993), for one, admits that institutions like Hammer and their products should be understood as both cultural *and* economic entities (15). As this paper’s findings suggest, case studies that consider financing, ownership, and management add valuable insight into not just matters of economics but also issues of culture, society, and transnational power. As Richard Nowell (2014) points out, “media industry studies” is not simply a framework that reduces cultural output to the “profit-seeking motive” of capitalist pursuits (1). In truth, media industry studies, including studies of financing documents, offers a multiperspectival framework that can interrogate a particular production company or studio’s internal microeconomic logic, dissect the socio-cultural complexities of its financing and greenlight process, and address the autonomy and contestation

Peter Arne Johnson is currently a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is pursuing a PhD in Media Studies. His research focuses on media finance and ownership. Pete has also worked in business development and sales for various film, television, and technology companies. He received his M.F.A. in Film & Television Studies from Boston University, where he also received his B.S. in Film & Television and B.S. in Business Administration.

of individual stakeholders.

In the case of Hammer in the 1950s, a *transnational* industrial approach is necessary to identify how U.S. entities and a hegemonic Hollywood system may have manipulated Hammer's content and, in many ways, usurped its revenue. Therefore, to argue that Hammer is strictly a British/English phenomenon is to ignore Hammer's mode of production and Hollywood's pivotal role in disrupting the autonomy of U.K. cinema after World War II. Although far from totalizing, this American manipulation was able to occur for several reasons: inefficient regulatory policies in the U.K., higher foreign and domestic demand for low-budget "B" pictures, and Hammer's "paycheck to paycheck," assembly-line production strategy. In this case study, I leverage historical accounts of post-war U.K. regulation and the production details from Hammer films like *The Quatermass Xperiment* (Val Guest, 1955) to highlight Hollywood's tampering in post-war British cinema, on both a financial and textual level.

Revisionist Histories of Hammer

Despite the validity of a media industry studies approach to Hammer, some of the historical discourses surrounding Hammer risk oversimplifying its history into a reductively dichotomous narrative that glosses over the company's complex evolution. In one respect, this paper demonstrates how some studies (Barnett 2014; Meikle 1996) implicitly split the company's history into pre-*Frankenstein* and post-*Frankenstein*; in other words, the focus on *Frankenstein* suggests that everything in Hammer's history was deterministically leading up to the success of *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957), and all of its subsequent films were reflective of the same type of lush horror style that *Frankenstein* popularized.¹ Revisionist histories of Hammer, and even comments from Hammer producers, suggest that the company's financial

¹ For example, Vincent Barnett (2014) provides a detailed political economy of various Hammer contracts, but examines the distribution agreements for only *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, rather than for other productions like *Quatermass* or Hammer's earlier films from the 1930s or 1940s, such as the first installment of the popular *Dick Barton* trilogy, *Dick Barton: Special Agent* (Alfred J. Goulding, 1948). Barnett's focus only on *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* may be the product of archival limitations and other methodological challenges that limit the ability to focus on other less popular films from the Hammer vault. However, if this assumption is correct, it nonetheless reflects how Hammer's Gothic pictures and their historical documents were still considered worth saving, as part of our collective memory, versus other Hammer B pictures.

success after *Frankenstein* in the late 1950s launched the company into a newfound period of flourishing assembly-line production, something akin to a Poverty Row studio in Hollywood (Barnett 2014, 233). In another respect, it may be tempting to instead mark *Quatermass* as a new phase of Hammer's history because it was the studio's first popular "horror" film, as Hammer producer James Carreras suggested (Meikle 1996, 1). However, both of these frameworks are oversimplifications; Hammer—a production and distribution company founded in 1934—had implemented a mass production model well before *Quatermass* and *Frankenstein*. Still, Hammer's post-1957 Gothic output—rather than its post-*Frankenstein* B productions or its eclectic output pre-*Quatermass*/*Frankenstein*—tends to receive the majority of attention from academic and mainstream sources.

While a focus on late Hammer does not automatically invalidate studies on *Quatermass* or *Frankenstein*, the paucity of literature on Hammer's full financial history foregrounds the need to consider the studio more holistically. These before/after historical dichotomies elide Hammer's complex history, not to mention the enigmatic producers and financiers that shaped its success. Indeed, this assembly-line style was embedded in the DNA of Hammer and its miserly production boss, James Carreras, who instituted a factory-like approach to production well before 1955. Therefore, Hammer was distinctly "Fordian"—a term referring to the mass production strategies of automaker Henry Ford—well before *Quatermass* and *The Curse of Frankenstein*, let alone *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958). Moreover, Meikle (1996) points out, "even the success of *The Quatermass Experiment* would not be enough to convince James Carreras to put all Hammer's eggs into one basket, and this scattergun approach [to production] was to remain the order of the day" (26). Thus, the assembly-line model not only predated *Quatermass* but would continue to be a key to Hammer's strategy. In other words, Hammer continued to produce a number of non-horror B films during its run of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* sequels. Accordingly, this paper seeks to dispel the oversimplifications placed on Hammer's filmography and instead contends that the studio's "house style" and Fordian production model were embedded in its business practices throughout the post-war years. Due to this production model, Hammer's output was subject to American influence and thereby was not simply a product of contemporaneous socio-cultural trends and events in mid-century England. Indeed, it was Hammer's assembly-line model and Carreras's closefisted business philosophy that, coupled with ineffectual U.K. regulation, opened the door for American financiers to acquire substantial equity in (and influence over) Hammer.

Ineffectual Regulation and the Rise of International Financing in the 1940s and 1950s

While the production details of *Quatermass* and other Hammer films are certainly vital to contextualize the influence of American investors, the shifting regulatory policies, the Labor party's ineffective self-financing attempts, and the swelling demand from U.S. exhibitors all set the stage for myriad American investors to enter the U.K. market and monopolize Hammer's output in the 1950s. Some of the first cultural regulations after World War II were policies sympathetic to the U.K. film industry in order to protect it from foreign entrants.² Generally, the government was pro-business after World War II and was not concerned with breaking up the film industry, as its U.S. counterparts were; in fact, the U.K. was hoping to *replicate* the vertically integrated structure that had made Hollywood studios so dominant and successful. At the time, regulators believed that the country needed strong action to "counter" these much larger and more powerful Hollywood studios (Street 1997, 16).

Despite the government's best efforts to foster local production to counter Hollywood's hegemony, American lobbyists and other economic entities manipulated the post-war political landscape for their financial advantage. In 1947, for example, the U.K. was rightfully concerned that American imports were sending British pounds out of the domestic market, so regulators imposed the Dalton Duty, which was a 75% tax on all imported American films (Street 1997, 16). However, when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) responded by boycotting the distribution of American films in the U.K. altogether, lawmakers swiftly reversed the Dalton Duty and instituted a less severe measure that simply limited U.S. studios to a maximum annual box office return for their American-produced pictures (Street 1997, 17). Thereafter, regulators tried to increase the domestic quota to 45%, whereby nearly half of all films exhibited in the U.K. needed to be "primarily" produced within the country (Street 1997, 8). However, Hollywood studios and U.K. exhibitors complained that this measure was also too restrictive, so they pressured regulators to decrease the quota to 30%

² There were certainly earlier policies that addressed the demand for domestic products. For example, the Cinematograph Films Act 1927, also known as the Quota Act, set the domestic quota at 7.5% for distributors. This minimum was increased to 20% in 1935 (Chibnall 2007, 3).

(effectively as an amendment to the Quota Act) (Street 1997, 8).³ Once again attempting to regain control from Hollywood and other imports, legislators instituted the 1950 Eadie Levy, a voluntary tax rebate scheme that divided a proportion of box office rebates between domestic exhibitors and producers if a film qualified as “British” (Street 1997, 19). Similar to the Dalton Duty, this effort to counter Hollywood was only marginally successful; as Sarah Street notes, the Eadie Levy was abolished in 1985 because it was widely accepted that American producers were the primary beneficiaries of the code (1997, 19). Overall, the impotence of particular policies and the erosion of potentially beneficial measures reflected Hollywood’s continuing influence over not only content but also politics in the U.K. Though measures like the domestic quota, the Dalton Duty, and the Eadie Levy were designed to encourage more homegrown productions, they were ultimately softened, or taken advantage of, by hegemonic U.S. forces.

Even if these measures had been effective and limited the competition from Hollywood, the British market still did not have enough local capital to completely self-finance its pictures. The 1950s domestic quota, even at 30%, required a substantial increase in local production that the U.K. capital market could not support. In other words, in this type of environment, it would have been challenging for an independent production company like Hammer to succeed *without* foreign capital. Effectively, postwar legislation, particularly the domestic quota, created a critical supply gap in capital that forced companies like Hammer to turn to both mass-production models and American financiers, who would eventually leverage their financial position to strong-arm Hammer into accepting unfavorable terms (Street 1997, 18). Indeed, from 1945 to 1960, Hammer produced an average of four to seven films annually, and to finance these pictures, even at low production costs, producers like James Carreras needed to foster relationships with American producers who had connections to studio financiers and distributors. Therefore, at least on a financial level, U.S. influence was present in Hammer’s productions in the 1940s—well before the company’s Universal-inspired monster films in the late 1950s.

Despite the U.S. influence over industry legislation and an increasing number of international co-productions, the British government nonetheless

³ It is worth noting that even at 30%, the quota led to a spike in independent production. Indeed, Hammer was just one of many small and medium-sized production companies that had emerged, hoping to fulfill the demand created by the Quota Act and its subsequent amendments; though, many independents quickly went out of business due to the harsh economics of independent film production (Chibnall 2007, 1–6).

continued to provide domestic financing policies aimed at discouraging American alternatives. In 1949, for example, the Labor government created the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), which provided institutional loans to British distribution companies, who could then pass on this capital onto independent production companies (Street 1997, 18). However, NFFC loans typically only funded a portion of a film's production budget, so assistance from other sources, typically international financiers, was often still necessary. Moreover, NFFC loans were rarely repaid in full back to the government because state loan balances were secondary to private investments. Also, even if the principal amount was returned to the state, the NFFC received only a marginal interest payment on top of the principal, rather than an equity share (Barnett 2014, 243). As a result, international financiers from the United States and elsewhere did not need to compete with British institutional investors for a piece of gross profits/equity. Whereas the NFFC only took a small fee in proportion to the loan, American investors earned a percentage of a film's total profit. Like other government quotas and taxes, the NFFC's effort to counter Hollywood was only partially successful, and its success was limited because it did not take equity ownership in its investments. In this political economy, the financial success and autonomy of Hammer, and by extension the U.K. film industry, was limited from the outset.

A New Demand in United States Exhibition

In addition to increased quota requirements, a new demand for independent B pictures in the United States further accelerated Hammer's incentive to mass-produce low-budget pictures in the early 1950s. Indeed, a recent shift in the political economy of the Hollywood studio system manufactured this need for more B pictures from European and independent American producers. For the previous three decades, vertically integrated Hollywood studios had prevented foreign and independent producers from meaningfully entering the U.S. market, as studio moguls completely controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of cinematic products (Street 1997, 8). However, in the aftermath of the consequential *United States v. Paramount Case* in 1948, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling effectively led the Hollywood studios to divest their theater interests and end their block

booking practices⁴, both of which significantly weakened their hegemony of U.S. distribution (Davis 2012, 67). With the *Paramount* decision and the end of block booking, the major studios had little incentive to continue producing in-house B films. However, this decrease in B pictures disrupted the equilibrium between the supply and demand for cinematic products in the U.S. and abroad, as B pictures had previously provided many small and medium theaters with the volume necessary to fill up their weekly showtime schedules and ensure sufficient variety, beyond just big-budget A pictures (Davis 2012, 67).

This critical supply gap—estimated to be an annual deficit of 150 films per year for most non-urban U.S. theaters—provided independent producers, both U.S. and non-U.S., with an opportunity to accelerate production and ascertain more distribution/exhibition deals for their films (Davis 2012, 71). As B movie scholar Blair Davis (2012) notes, smaller production companies like Hammer “were seeking deals with several of the major Hollywood studios, using the industry’s trend toward obtaining independently made B-movie product to fullest advantage” (97). These commercial developments occurring across the Atlantic thus provided Hammer with an incentive to mass-produce content without overwhelming regard for budget or quality. It also incentivized a weakened Hollywood system to shift its attention to international markets, where it could acquire and invest in these inexpensive films. As illustrated by the production details of *Quatermass*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula* in the following sections, American producers and distributors held considerable influence over many production details and retained a considerable portion of each film’s total profit, which limited Hammer’s long-term success, enterprise value, and cash on hand.

A Political Economy of *Quatermass*

The financing details of *Quatermass* highlight the diverse investment interests that Hammer turned to, in the 1950s, after weak legislative reforms and limited state financing. A variety of eclectic interests, including the BBC, American producer James Lippert, the NFFC, and the U.S. distributor United Artists (UA), all had their hands in financing *Quatermass* and siphoning

⁴ Block booking was a popular strategy among the major U.S. studios that forced independent (and international) exhibitors to buy a studio’s entire annual output, regardless of quality or local demand. In other words, in order to exhibit the popular “A” pictures, exhibitors also needed to buy the often less popular “B” pictures.

Hammer's potential profitability. Many of these financiers put a financial strain on Hammer and limited its ability to reinvest *Quatermass's* profits back into the company for future projects.

Before seeking financing and initiating the pre-production process, Hammer had to first acquire the intellectual property rights to *Quatermass*. *Quatermass* was based on a popular BBC television series, *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953), created by writer Nigel Kneale. At that time, Hammer had already turned several BBC radio and television programs into low-budget programmer films (i.e., B films) (Meikle 1996, 2). Recognizing the popularity of the six-episode BBC series, Hammer producer Anthony Hinds quickly negotiated the terms for the *Quatermass* film rights with the BBC (Thompson 1987). Still relatively unknown at the time, Hammer offered the BBC a shockingly generous 50/50 profit split, which the network quickly accepted; this was a much more favorable arrangement than what other mainstream producers were offering the BBC and the other rights holders at the time (Thompson 1987). This arrangement reveals that, before Hammer had even obtained financing, the content rights for *Quatermass* put the company in a vulnerable economic position, in that it was already less likely to turn a profit or be able to reinvest in future projects.

Unable to fully finance its pictures on its own, Hammer typically turned to outside parties for production funding. In the case of *Quatermass* and several other 1950s productions, Hammer turned to the enigmatic American producer Robert Lippert, who was known for producing "twelve-day quickies" and owned several independent American theaters (Meikle 1996, 10–11). According to industry lore, Lippert was also known to operate as an "invisible agent" on behalf of 20th Century Fox and other Hollywood studios (Meikle 1996, 10–11). Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane (2009) note how deals like those between Hammer and American financiers "transformed the economics" of B productions in the U.K. (49). Hoping to leverage this relationship with Lippert to get closer to Hollywood studios, Hammer entered into a four-year, multi-picture deal with the American producer in 1951 (Meikle 1996, 11–13). Per the terms of the contract, Lippert would finance a portion of Hammer's productions and find distribution for its films in the United States (Meikle 1996, 12–13). In exchange, Exclusive, Hammer's parent company and distribution arm, would also distribute Lippert's American films in the United Kingdom (Meikle 1996, 12–13). Overall, the terms of this partnership and Lippert's tenuous connection to major Hollywood studios illustrate Hollywood's new backdoor strategies to control global content production and distribution after the damaging effects of the 1948 Paramount

Decreases. Although Chibnall and McFarlane conclude that deals like these increased Hammer's budgets and ultimately improved the production values of its films—at least above those of other independent B productions in the 1950s—this case study suggests that the deals with Lippert and others were hardly beneficial for Hammer (2009, 49).

In addition to financing *Quatermass*, Lippert also had a say in several aspects of production, including commenting on the film's tone, script, marketing, and casting. First, Lippert and his American partners insisted on the casting of American actor, Brian Donlevy, for the part of the grizzled lead, Professor Bernard Quatermass, even though the character was English and represented a uniquely middle-class English persona in the original television series (Meikle 1996, 13). Although scholars like Pirie and Julian Petley point out how Hammer films often reflected domestic middle-class struggles, Hutchings (1993) observes that, in this case, Donlevy's performance as a “bullying authority figure” and his American accent made Professor Quatermass “cosmopolitan” and “classless” in the film adaptation (49). Meikle also notes how Hollywood scriptwriter Richard Landau “Americanized” several of the character names during the pre-production process (1996, 21). In addition to these casting choices, *Quatermass*'s narrative is also “relentlessly *noir* in ... tone” and thereby reflective of Hollywood genre constructions (Meikle 1996, 13). In several scenes in *Quatermass*, the sets are draped in expressionist, low-contrast lighting, with characters lurking in alleyways or dimly lit streets; these elements embodied 1940s Hollywood film noir—a genre cycle popular in post-war America. This style and tone, coupled with the grizzled American lead who evoked the hardboiled detectives familiar to film noir, foreground Lippert's Americanized input and perhaps his desire to consider what type of content would appeal to non-U.K. markets—namely, the United States.

Additionally, the *Quatermass* television narrative was reworked to fit into the needs of U.S. and U.K. exhibition practices. After Landau's pass on the screenplay, director Val Guest further revised the script and reduced much of the exposition to provide the film with a compact narrative and a runtime short enough so it could play alongside other American B movies on a double-bill (Meikle 1996, 22). Therefore, the film's creators seemingly put more thought into the film's U.S. distribution and audience than that of its U.K. release. However, despite the valuable funding that these Hollywood stakeholders provided, Hammer producers openly disliked the American control over *Quatermass* (Meikle 1996, 15); this insinuates that perhaps Hammer producers did not fully anticipate the extent to which their American

partners would control the film at a textual level. Examining the horror production company Amicus, Peter Hutchings (2002) rightly points out that industrial factors like these complicate our understanding of British horror as a “discrete national object” (133).

Overall, Hammer’s co-financing agreements with Hollywood stakeholders and this mix of American/English genres/tastes seemingly made the studio’s post-war filmography distinct from other “quota quickies” during the period. Steve Chibnall (2007) documents how quota quickies have been met with ire and neglect in both industrial and academic discourses. Indeed, American financing and distribution behind many of these quota quickies have made them easier to dismiss in cultural histories of British cinema. Chibnall counters that these dismissals of B pictures and quota quickies belie the fact that the films were made by British producers for British audiences. In fact, according to Chibnall, these films offered the opportunity to engage directly with uniquely British concerns. As this case study on *Quatermass* suggests, however, much of Hammer’s output, particularly in the 1950s, did not fall into this category. If anything, the mix of British and American involvement made Hammer pictures an ambivalent combination of American and British tastes and genre traditions.

In terms of U.S. distribution, Lippert initially wanted Columbia Pictures to distribute *Quatermass*, but the film was too similar to Columbia’s contemporaneous “monster vehicle” *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (Robert Gordon, 1955), so the Columbia passed (Meikle 1996, 28). After some back and forth, United Artists eventually agreed to pick up the film in exchange for a flat \$125,000 distribution fee, presumably taken off the top of gross receipts (Meikle 1996, 28). This high fee represented UA’s lack of confidence in the film. Indeed, UA’s decision to take a significant upfront fee to distribute *Quatermass*, rather than taking a larger portion of the back-end profits, suggests that the studio did not believe the project would break even. Though this goes unacknowledged by Hammer producers, investors, and historians, it is possible that United Artists agreed to distribute the film only as a favor to Lippert, who wanted to please Exclusive/Hammer, the company responsible for distributing his films in a key market: the U.K. If United Artists had truly believed the film was going to be successful, it would have requested the more advantageous option: a box office split, which would have provided the studio with significant upside if the film were successful (which it was) (Meikle 1996, 28).

After the completion of the film, United Artists also changed the film’s U.S. title to *The Creeping Unknown* in order to appeal to a growing U.S. teen

audience that was demanding more monster pictures (Meikle 1996, 28). Indeed, American audiences were ultimately drawn to the film—it was hugely successful in the United States—because of these horror elements, not necessarily its noir or sci-fi elements (Thompson 1987). This demonstrates, on the one hand, how *Quatermass's* success and its place in the cultural memory were not exclusively tied to British culture and, on the other hand, how the success of the film was by no means the result of a highly calculated plan on

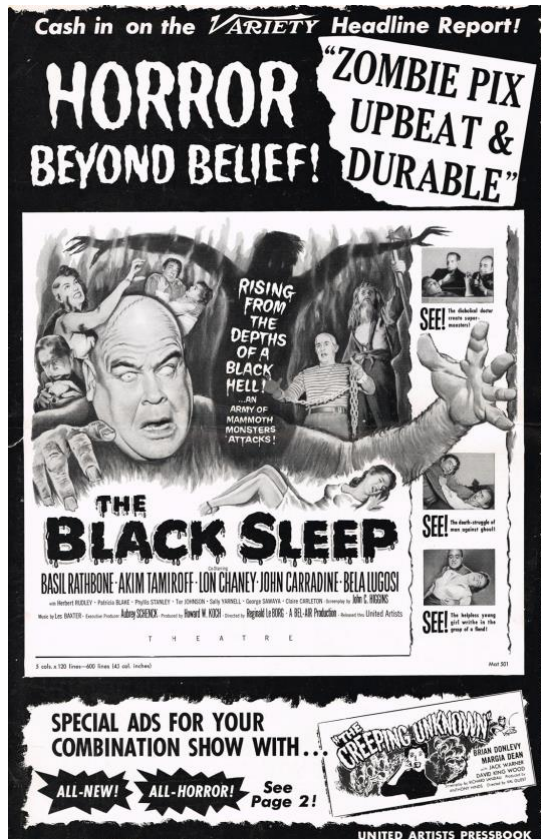


Figure 1: 1955 ad for the double-bill of *The Black Sheep* and *The Creeping Unknown* (the U.S. title for *The Quatermass Xperiment*) (United Artists Pressbook)

war, and “pre-historic” films. Moreover, the fact that *Quatermass* was put on a double-bill with the French heist noir *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955) in the U.K., and then with the independent horror film *The Black Sheep* (Reginald Le Borg, 1956) in the U.S., points to the ambivalent genre strategies of Hammer and its distributors in the mid-1950s (Meikle 1996, 315). Therefore, the success of *Quatermass* did not necessarily indicate that Hammer was intentionally tapping

the part of Hammer producers. At first, the company was simply trying to capitalize on the popularity of the eponymous BBC television series in the U.K. and later on the mainstream success of American monster/sci-fi films like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *Devil Girl from Mars* (David MacDonald, 1954). Instead of yielding a calculated success that foretold the company’s future as a lush horror production house, Hammer’s rapid four-week production schedule and mass production techniques provided it with an opportunity to create enough B pictures, such that at least one would align with the interests of a particular audience or a popular trend. Although largely known today for its splashy Gothic pictures, Hammer produced and distributed many other films that spanned an eclectic array of genres, including sci-fi, comedy, detective, drama,

into some popular genre trend. Regardless of whether it was individual genius or happenstance, *Quatermass* nonetheless did indicate to Hammer's producers that this brand of horror was both marketable and popular, which provided the studio with enough incentive to continue applying its past Fordian logic to a smattering of future horror projects.

Many, including Hammer's founders and producers, have identified *Quatermass* as the production company's clear transition into horror after an eclectic output of quota quickies in the 1940s and 1950s. Senior producer Michael Carreras even noted, "the film that must take all the credit for the whole Hammer series of horror films was really *The Quatermass Experiment*" (Meikle 1996, 1). However, the overlapping generic tones found in *Quatermass* and Hammer's other films in the 1950s contradict Carreras's simple assessment. Although there were certainly horror semantic elements in *Quatermass*, such as eerie musical leitmotifs and an amorphous monster villain, the film also contains sci-fi semantic elements, such as space travel, aliens, and advanced technologies, not to mention noir elements, such as a grizzled detective, gritty nighttime cinematography, and what Meikle calls a noir-esque "dark psychology" (1996, 13). This lack of generic identity reflects Hammer's ambivalent economic logic in the 1950s: mass produce as many quota quickies as possible to take advantage of an open U.S. market and ensure *Exclusive* hit its domestic quota requirements. The multiplicity of genres in *Quatermass* also suggests that Hammer producers wanted to keep their options open and follow whatever cultural trend was popular. As the horror elements in *Quatermass* were largely incidental, the tendency to position it as Hammer's complete transition into horror ignores the political economy of the production company in the 1950s and the involvement of American and British writers, directors, and producers. This is further supported by the fact that producers were, surprisingly, hesitant to make *The Curse of Frankenstein* when they first read the script (shortly after *Quatermass*'s release) due to what they perceived as "poor writing" and their general aversion to the Gothic subject matter (Thompson 1987). It is unclear why, if the horror elements of *Quatermass* were as popular as Hammer's producers had claimed, a film like *Frankenstein* was not an automatic green light. Considering Hammer's production strategies during this period, the subsequent financial success of *Frankenstein* was likely circumstantial and another bit of stray luck amid Hammer's eclectic mix of quota quickies after World War II.

Continued American Influence: *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula*

It may be tempting to mark *The Curse of Frankenstein* or *Dracula* as Hammer's full transition into horror or to historicize these films as inevitable or part of a conscious effort to transition into lush Gothic adaptations. However, this assessment is reductive and reflects a desire in media historiography to celebrate "visionary" artistic creations in order to provide an institution with a unique identity; in reality, Hammer's foray into horror was part of a multilayered production process amidst a diverse post-war filmography that included thrillers, comedies, and dramas, rather than an all-out conscious revolution of the company. With an eclectic output of four to seven films annually, Hammer had hoped that its films would make just enough money to cover production costs, with maybe even a little bit left over to partially finance the next film. In other words, the studio had no clear long-term strategy. Indeed, even *Dracula* operates under the same assembly-line logic of past quota quickies and, more importantly, is paradigmatic of how foreign stakeholders influenced Hammer content. Both of these factors problematize the oversimplified arguments that Hammer's horror success was predestined after "this" or "that" film.

Similar to *Quatermass*, *Dracula* relied on American investors, who influenced the film's content and ultimately hoarded its profits. At the end of its four-year agreement with Lippert, Hammer turned to another American producer, Eliot Hyman, who was considered "the most significant of Hammer's silent partners" and, similar to Lippert, served as the middleman between Hammer and Hollywood studios (Barnett 2014, 234). In the case of *Dracula*, Hyman funded approximately half of the film's production budget through his company, Seven Arts, while Hammer needed to self-finance the other half (Barnett 2014, 238). Revealing the tenuous financial condition of Hammer at the time, Barnett claims that Hammer's budgetary contribution to *Dracula* was provided by the NFFC (2014, 237). Absent from the financing of the film was Universal, who would later distribute the film in the United States. Hedging its bets, Universal refused to provide upfront financing for *Dracula* and did not sign a distribution contract until *after* the film was completed (Barnett 2014, 237–241). Therefore, as Hammer would have still needed to court the studio during production, Universal's delayed involvement forced Hammer producers to develop a product that simultaneously appealed to American audiences, Universal executives, Hyman, and British audiences. Also, even though Hyman, Hammer, and the NFFC absorbed the majority of the risk in financing *Dracula*, Universal was still positioned to profit the most.

According to a U.S. distribution contract for *Dracula*, Universal recouped its distribution costs first, and then profits were split among Hyman, Universal, and Hammer (Barnett 2014, 242). This, effectively, put all of the risk on Hammer and provided Universal with most of the upside. Moreover, the NFFC, and thereby U.K. taxpayers, were in a far less advantageous financial position, as the NFFC “did not ... receive a percentage of the box-office for providing finance” and instead only “receive[d] interest ... in the region of 4% or 5%” (Barnett 2014, 243). Therefore, the political economy of *Dracula*’s financing suggests that hegemonic American stakeholders not only influenced Hammer’s production but also benefited financially at the expense of other parties.

Although *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula* did not rely on the BBC’s intellectual property as Hammer had for *Quatermass*, Hammer still needed to consider Universal’s original adaptations of *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and alter their content just enough to avoid copyright claims from the studio. Although seemingly stifling, this aversion to copyright litigation provided Hammer with an idiosyncratic approach to the underlying intellectual property, which allowed Hammer to pursue its famous “house style” that was strikingly different from the original Universal adaptations. For Hammer, necessity was the mother of invention. Whether through the distinct look of Frankenstein’s monster in *Frankenstein*, which departs from the hulking monster of Universal’s incarnations, or the debonair English Count in *Dracula*, which departs from Bela Lugosi’s portly “foreign” Dracula (or the very fact that these films were in color and featured vibrant production designs), Hammer found its artistic originality largely *because of* this economic and legal restriction, not in spite of it. Despite these departures from the Universal originals, Hutchings (2002) points out that Hammer was not only “heavily dependent on American financing throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s” but also that “the Hammer film-makers took as much inspiration from 1930s and 1940s American horror as they did from more obviously British sources” (133). While both of these Gothic films are closely analyzed for their distinctly British connotations, the threat of suit from Universal and the inspiration taken from the original adaptations, at least in part, led to the artistry and idiosyncratic style that late-1950s Hammer became known for. Therefore, just as cultural trends and social allegories can illuminate a film’s textual elements, industrial considerations can elucidate the artistic meaning and aesthetics within a particular text.

Conclusion

Although Hammer was somewhat the product of British culture and domestic social trends, the financing details and political economy of its productions suggest that its post-war output cannot be separated from American industrial influence and various economic circumstances. In the immediate post-war years, constantly changing cinematic regulation reflected not only American manipulation of British policies but also how the U.K. government unintentionally led independent producers to turn to international financiers to meet their domestic quota requirements. Furthermore, the production details of *The Quatermass Xperiment* foreground how American producers influenced the narratives, casting, and generic tones of Hammer's output. The details of *Quatermass* also indicate that Hammer never had a genuine opportunity to turn a profit or pursue a long-term business strategy, as foreign influences strong-armed the company into accepting unfavorable contractual terms. *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* further reflect this hegemonic capture and suggest that Hammer's unique house style may have come from an American industrial factor: an aversion to copyright litigation. The intention of this analysis is not to recontextualize a distinct national cinema through a reductive or strictly American framework; rather, it is to identify the unequal, and at times unseen, power relationships between two national cinemas—in this case, between a hegemonic Hollywood system and a recovering post-war U.K. cinema. Even though Hollywood was not necessarily in active opposition to British cinema in a political sense, its commercial logic and calcified economic structures ambivalently restricted the financial and artistic autonomy of independent producers.

Furthermore, the findings in this paper suggest that media industries scholarship should turn to the fine print of distribution contacts and legal agreements to see who truly *owns* a particular production, as this is where true wealth creation, autonomy, and/or resistance to hegemonic entities can be found. Often, artistry and the “visionary” status of writers and directors like Val Guest or of Hammer's other producers are used to pull genres like horror above their discursively “low” status in generic taste hierarchies. However, these types of perspectives elide the banal realities of film development, financing, and productions, not to mention the multiplicity of unseen financial stakeholders and craftspeople that contribute to a film's final output.

When speaking of mid-century British cinema, David Pirie (1973) claims that horror is “the only staple cinematic myth which Britain can properly claim as its own” (9). Pirie's claim suggests that U.K. horror is

connected to a uniquely British experience. Although ideological, social, and historical investigations are undoubtedly valid and deftly deconstruct the complexity of American/British hybridities, these analyses should also be contextualized within industrial lenses and, in this case, informed by the specific terms of transnational financing. In the case of Hammer in the 1950s, an industrial framework can unravel the true story of Hammer's post-war years and trace the multiplicity of financial entities that may have influenced its output and perhaps even helped create its legendary "style."

References

- Barnett, Vincent. 2014. "Hammering out a Deal: The Contractual and Commercial Contexts of *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958)." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 34 (2): 231–252. DOI: 10.1080/01439685.2013.847650.
- Chibnall, Steve. 2007. *Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British 'B' Film*. London: The British Film Institute.
- Chibnall, Steve, and Brian McFarlane. 2009. *The British 'B' Film*. London: The British Film Institute.
- Davis, Blair. 2012. *The Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fisher, Terence, dir. 1957. *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Hammer Film Productions.
- . 1958. *Dracula*. Hammer Film Productions.
- Guest, Val, dir. 1955. *The Quatermass Experiment*. Hammer Film Productions.
- Hutchings, Peter. 1993. *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- . 2002. "The Amicus house of horror." In *British Horror Cinema*, edited by Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, 131–144. London: Routledge.
- Meikle, Denis. 1996. *A History of Horrors: The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer*. Toronto: The Scarecrow Press Inc.
- Nowell, Richard. 2014. "Introduction: There's Gold in Them There Chills." In *Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema*, edited by Richard Nowell, 1–8. London: Bloomsbury.

- Petley, Julian. 2002. “‘A Crude Sort of Entertainment for a Crude Sort of Audience’: The British Critics and Horror Cinema.” In *British Horror Cinema*, edited by Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, 23–41. London: Routledge.
- Pirie, David. 1973. *A Heritage of Horror*. London: Gordon Fraser.
- Thompson, David, dir. 1987. *Hammer: The Studio That Dripped Blood*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation. YouTube.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4k6mRMw9fk.
- United Artists Corp. 1956. “The Black Sheep and The Creeping Unknown.” Pressbook, New York.
- Street, Sarah. 1997. *British National Cinema*. London: Routledge.

- 2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).