



The Hammer Frankenstein Pages

Frankenstein According to the House of Hammer

When struggling Hammer Studios released *The Curse of Frankenstein* in 1957, it gave the movie industry a bit of a shock. This film is often credited with resurrecting the genre of Gothic Horror. It certainly revitalized the image of Frankenstein and his creature.

First of all, it was the first film in decades to take the subject matter seriously. For years, Frankenstein's monster had appeared only in comedy films -- and taken second billing to the comedians. He was most often seen at supermarket openings and theatre dedications, standing right next to Scarlet O'Hara or Dorothy & Toto.

But Hammer filmed a grim & grisly tale of terror. It is childishly tame by today's gruesome standards, but in 1957 the blatant murders and severed body parts were quite a jolt. The critics vilified it, of course -- and audiences flocked to it in droves, breaking box-office records in England and making it a smash hit all over the world.



And my oh my, what they did to Baron Frankenstein himself. To be honest, much of the changes to the look of the monster and the direction of the story were done to avoid legal hassles. Universal studios made no secret of their eagerness to sue anyone making a film even remotely resembling their original classic. So Hammer focused the film less on the creature and more on the creator. No longer was Frankenstein a tragic victim, sorry for transgressing the laws of nature. This new Baron was unapologetic, amoral, and fanatically devoted to his twisted science. Played by Cushing with a chilling mix of icy imperiousness and schoolboy glee, this Frankenstein would think nothing of murdering his closest friend if it would advance his experiments.

In many of these films, the creature has but a small supporting role. The real monster is Frankenstein himself. And the series was wildly popular -- with it, Hammer spawned a whole new generation of horror films.



presented in chronological order

the CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN

(1957) dir: Terence Fisher; w/ Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, Robert Urquhart, Hazel Court.

The first of Hammer's great horror flicks -- a very loose & melodramatic retelling of the Mary Shelley story. It's tame by today's standards, but has a high gruesomeness content for its era. Lee's portrayal of the monster is less sympathetic and more horrifying, and Cushing's chilling performance establishes the Hammer Frankenstein as utterly amoral and criminally insane. A little slow, like most of Jimmy Sangster's scripts, but a lot of drive-in style chills & fun.





the REVENGE OF FRANKENSTEIN

(1958- Hammer) dir: Terence Fisher; w/ Peter Cushing, Francis Matthews, Eunice Gayson, Michael Gwynn, (Michael Ripper does a terrific bit as a drunk graverobber). No skin, no gore.

The diabolical doctor escapes his impending execution with a little bribery. Under the name of Dr. Stein, he sets up a thriving practice in Carlsbruck, where he acquires a protégé and transplants the brain of a deformed man into a perfect new body made of scraps from the poor ward. But what starts out as a success is mucked up by the usual meddling fools, and Frankenstein's past begins to catch up with him. The baron's character is a bit more sympathetic this time out, if not actually heroic. The film has some great characters and good photography, although the script wanders a bit and lacks a climax. Nonetheless, it's a solid entry in the series. A good bedtime flick.



the EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN

(1964 - Hammer) dir: Freddie Francis; w/ Peter Cushing, Peter Woodthorpe, Duncan Lamont, Sandor Eles, Katy Wild. No skin, no gore.

After a six year hiatus, Cushing plays Frankenstein a third time. This time, he plays him at the height of his criminal insanity -- arrogant, cruel, and intolerant. The baron returns to his old stomping grounds and rebuilds his first monster. But things go sour when he is forced to team up with a slimy carnival hypnotist. The script is diffuse, but entertaining; there's plenty of action (for a Hammer flick) and some great characters.



Some of the characters, however, are entirely superfluous -- such as Katy Wild as the deaf beggar girl, but she's so dang cute that it's hard to object. A good old-fashioned gothic horror and a nice choice for late night viewing.

Frankenstein quote: "Shock? I've just shot the full force of a bolt of lightning through his skull! Isn't that shock enough?"



FRANKENSTEIN CREATED WOMAN

(1967 - 7 Arts/Hammer) dir: Terence Fisher; w/ Peter Cushing, Susan Denberg, Thorley Walters. No skin, no gore.

Frankenstein traps the soul of a hot-headed young man and uses it to reanimate the corpse of a hot-bodied young woman. Somewhere along the way is a shallow excuse for a little bloody revenge. The whole script, in fact, is shallow & simplistic. Cushing, as always, gives a great performance as the amoral baron, but this entry in the series falls entirely flat. Even for 1967, the shock & gruesomeness content is nil, the story plods along slowly & predictably, Frankenstein's infamous surgery skills are replaced by metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, and the ending is a non-event. In fewer words, it's dull.

FRANKENSTEIN MUST BE DESTROYED

(1969 - Hammer) dir: Terence Fisher; w/ Peter Cushing, Veronica Carlson, Freddie Jones, Simon Ward, Thorley Walters. No skin; no gore.

The doctor seeks to preserve the brain of a mad (literally) scientist who has knowledge Frankenstein wants. Driven deep underground and quite completely over the edge, Frankenstein stalks the



night with a sickle to acquire fresh surgical subjects, he blackmails & corrupts a young doctor to get an assistant, and blithely murders anyone who gets in his way. This is definitely the wickedest baron ever, although I thought the gratuitous rape scene was a bit out of character. The film has a few slow spots, but rewards with a few tense & grisly bits. Probably the best of the Hammer Frankenstein series.

HORROR OF FRANKENSTEIN

(1970 - Hammer) prod, writ, & dir: Jimmy Sangster; w/ Ralph Bates, Kate O'Mara, Veronica Carlson, Dennis Price, (Dave Prowse as the monster). No skin, mildest gore.

In a flimsy attempt to update the Frankenstein series, Hammer casts Bates as a young and “hip” Baron Frankenstein. The flick opens with him as a charming but over-sexed brat who arranges a fatal hunting accident for his father so he can have the money to go to university. The film shows more humor than the usual Sangster script, but if anything, is even slower. When the monster finally does show up, he's got a lot of catching up to do, since his creator has already murdered half the cast. Essentially, it's a sexy & violent rehash of the basic Frankenstein story, which Sangster no doubt hoped would appeal to a new generation of fans. I'll grant the movie does have its moments, and Bates really helps carry it, but in the end his character is just a tedious asshole and the monster is an uninspiring musclehead. Worse yet, the movie just sort of stops without any sense of climax -- or even a cheap payoff. Obviously, they were trying to lead into a quick sequel, but this attempt at a new branch of the Frankenstein mythos was mercifully lopped off.



FRANKENSTEIN & THE MONSTER FROM HELL

(1973 - Hammer) dir: Terence Fisher; w/ Peter Cushing, Shane Briant, Madeline Smith, (Dave Prowse as the creature, Patrick Troughton in a bit part). No skin; some juicy grisly bits.

For the final film in Hammer's series, they returned to the old Frankenstein and thankfully cast aside the comic relief. A young doctor is sentenced to an asylum for trying to follow in Frankenstein's footsteps. Fortunately for him, he ends up at the madhouse that serves as the Baron's secret hideout. Together, they stitch bits of expired patients into yet another homicidal monster. As a finale to the series, it serves nicely. The biggest weak point, of course, is the silly looking creature -- Dave Prowse, supposedly a hairy, musclebound neolithic man, looks as if he's wearing a ratty fur coat. On the other hand, there are some delightfully gothic moments, what with the monster in the graveyard and lunatics tossing entrails about. The ending obviously leads towards another sequel, but Hammer studios and the old-fashioned horror film were nearing the end of their days. Still, it's not a bad farewell performance, and good fun for fans of vintage gothic.



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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.