



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Viy

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Circumventing the restrictions of Soviet film production, *Viy* is a loose adaptation of a Nikolai Gogol story in which a seminary student is asked to say prayers for the soul of a young, recently deceased woman who turns out to be a witch. Over three nights, the witch torments him relentlessly. With special effects by Aleksandr Ptushko, *Viy* possesses nightmarish imagery that has lost none of its punch with the passage of time.

Anna Bogutskaya, bfi.org.uk

Soviet cinema was no stranger to horrific imagery, as anyone who has seen *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or *Come and See* (1985) can attest. But the Bolsheviks perceived the horror genre itself as inherently reactionary, and in the first 58 years of the USSR's existence it produced only one title that could unambiguously be described as a horror film, at least until 1980's *Savage Hunt of King Stakh*. *Viy*, however, was not just any old folk-horror yarn, but adapted from a short story by one of the most revered figures in Russian literature – the novelist, short-story writer and playwright Nikolai Gogol (1809-52), whom Vladimir Nabokov called 'the strangest prose-poet Russia ever produced'.

Two factors may have helped Konstantin Yershov and Georgi Kropachyov, both novice directors, convince Mosfilm to back their project. First, it was conceived as a patriotic 'correction' to Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (*La maschera del demonio*, 1960), based only very loosely on the same Gogol story and seen in the USSR as a Hollywood travesty of the source material, probably because the version distributed there was the American dub. Secondly, art direction and special effects were by Aleksandr Ptushko, who also received a co-writing credit. Ptushko, a visionary on the level of the Polish-Russian pioneer Wladyslaw Starewicz and Ray Harryhausen, had directed the first Soviet animated feature and a number of acclaimed live-action fantasies such as *The Stone Flower* (1946) and *Sadko* (1953), and his influence permeates the film.

Viy begins with scenes of boisterous student high jinks before following three seminarians through an increasingly desolate landscape in search of food and shelter. They spend the night at a farm where one of them, Khoma, is assaulted by an old witch and beats her to death in disgust, only to see the dying hag transformed into a beautiful young maiden. He flees in panic but, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, finds himself locked in a church, forced to hold vigil over the young woman's corpse for three terrifying nights. Suffice to say, things don't go well for him, and thanks to effects (stop motion, back projection, puppets and so on) that transcend the limitations of their time, the uncanny occurrences in the church can still generate a frisson. The witch's frenzied attempts to break into the student's hastily scrawled magic circle begin with her trying to breach the invisible wall like a manic Marcel Marceau, and escalate to her using her coffin as a battering ram-cum-surfboard. When all hell finally breaks loose ('I summon the vampires! I summon the werewolves!'), it's almost a relief, especially when the dreaded

‘Viy’ turns out to be a chonky gnome, though this might trigger unpleasant flashbacks in anyone traumatised as a child by the Nome King in *Return to Oz* (1985).

Gogol, born and brought up in Ukraine, first tasted literary success with *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831), a collection of stories praised for their authentic depiction of Ukrainian peasant life; most are of a macabre, ironic bent, and feature witches or devils. ‘Viy’, dismissed by Nabokov as ‘a gooseflesh story, not particularly effective’, appears in *Mirgorod*, his second collection (1835). Both story and film begin with Gogol’s claim that ‘Viy is a colossal creation of the imagination of simple folk. The tale itself is a purely popular legend. And I tell it without change, in all its simplicity, exactly as I heard it told to me.’ In fact, it seems to be entirely a product of the author’s own imagination, making this a literary precursor to the ‘based on a true story’ horror trope – cf *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). But the film makes it feel as though the story has sprung directly from Ukrainian soil.

Anne Billson, *Sight & Sound*, April 2021

VIY

Directors: K. Yershov, G Kropachyov

Production Company: Mosfilm

Screenplay: A Ptushko, K. Yershov, G Kropachov

Based on Viy by: Nikolai Gogol

Directors of Photography: V. Pishchalnikov, F. Provorov

Editors: R. Pesetskaya, T. Zubova

Art Director: A Ptushko

Special Effects: A Ptushko

Music: K Khachatryan

Cast

Leonid Kuravlyov (*Khoma*)

Natalya Varley (*mistress of house*)

Aleksei Glazyrin (*Cossack officer*)

Nicolai Kutuzov (*witch*)

P. Veskliarov (*rector*)

USSR 1967

77 mins

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Viy Fri 28 Oct 20:45; Tue 8 Nov 20:50

Creature from the Black Lagoon (3D) Sat 29 Oct 11:40; Tue 1 Nov 20:50

A Nightmare on Elm Street Sat 29 Oct 18:30; Wed 30 Nov 20:50

Candyman Sat 29 Oct 20:45; Thu 17 Nov 20:50 (+ intro)

Nightbreed – Director’s Cut Sun 30 Oct 15:10 (+ intro); Sat 12 Nov 20:35

28 Days Later Mon 31 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with director Danny Boyle); Sat 26 Nov 20:45

Kuroneko (Yabu no naka no kuroneko) Mon 31 Oct 21:00; Fri 18 Nov 18:15

I Walked With a Zombie Tue 1 Nov 18:10

Us Tue 1 Nov 20:40; Sat 19 Nov 15:10; Tue 29 Nov 20:40

The Autopsy of Jane Doe Wed 2 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 20:40

Let’s Scare Jessica to Death Wed 2 Nov 20:45; Sat 19 Nov 20:45

Blacula Thu 3 Nov 20:55; Sat 26 Nov 13:00

Cronos Fri 4 Nov 18:30; Sat 19 Nov 12:10; Sun 20 Nov 18:30

Fright Night Fri 4 Nov 20:50; Tue 22 Nov 20:40 (+ intro)

Possession Sat 5 Nov 20:20 (+ intro by author Kier-La Janisse); Sun 27 Nov 15:30

Ganja & Hess Mon 7 Nov 18:00; Sat 26 Nov 15:20

La Llorona Mon 7 Nov 21:00

Frankenstein Tue 8 Nov 18:20; Sun 27 Nov 13:00

Inferno Wed 9 Nov 20:40; Sat 26 Nov 18:20

The Entity Fri 11 Nov 17:55; Tue 15 Nov 20:30

Nosferatu (Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens) Sun 13 Nov 15:50 (+ intro by Silent Film Curator Bryony Dixon); Sat 19 Nov 14:10

The Skeleton Key Mon 14 Nov 20:45

Def by Temptation Wed 16 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 26 Nov 18:10

Jennifer’s Body Sun 20 Nov 15:15; Mon 21 Nov 18:00; Fri 25 Nov 20:45

Pontypool Mon 21 Nov 20:30; Sun 27 Nov 12:20

Under the Shadow Wed 23 Nov 20:40; Tue 29 Nov 18:10

Ouija: Origin of Evil Thu 24 Nov 20:40; Mon 28 Nov 18:10

Pet Semetary Fri 25 Nov 18:15; Mon 28 Nov 20:40

Good Manners (As Boas Maneiras) Sun 27 Nov 18:10; Wed 30 Nov 20:25

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