



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Night of the Eagle

Growing up with a fascination for the macabre, I sat up alone watching every horror film that turned up on late night TV. My education included the Universal horrors of the 1930s and 40s and Jacques Tourneur's haunting collaborations with producer Val Lewton. But it came as a revelation to discover that not all tales of horror are set in some vague eastern European locale or on a remote exotic island, and they could be even more frightening when they take place in your own backyard.

British films like *Village of the Damned* (1960), *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967) and the portmanteau offerings from Amicus had a special resonance, bringing the alien and supernatural closer to home, even into the home.

Freud developed the notion of the 'unheimlich' as a source of fear: something uncanny or 'unhomely' – the familiar made strange. What could be more 'unhomely' than a suburban British housewife who dismembers her obsessive husband (*The Vault of Horror*, 1973) or a spaceship full of giant insects uncovered in a disused underground station (*Quatermass and the Pit*). Or ambitious college wives practising voodoo to further their husbands' careers, as in the 1962 British film *Night of the Eagle*.

Perhaps we should call the film 'suburban gothic' – the representation of middle-class neighbourhoods as a hotbed of frustration, rivalry and fear. Based on the American story 'Conjure Wife' by Fritz Leiber, *Night of the Eagle* relocates the narrative to Britain, although with several American actors thrown in, presumably to boost US sales.

As in *Night of the Demon*, Jacques Tourneur's 1957 exploration of the dark arts, the film tells of a no-nonsense academic who resolutely denies the existence of witchcraft. Norman Taylor (Peter Wyngarde) is a very successful psychology professor at Hempwell Medical College who is first seen telling his class that superstition is nonsense. So he is furious when he discovers his wife Tansy's 'protections' all over the house.

These black magic accoutrements – a dead spider, an animal skull, graveyard earth – were acquired from a witch-doctor while living in Jamaica. Norman, convinced that all such beliefs are a form of neurosis, forces Tansy to throw the tricks of her trade into the fire, where they sizzle suggestively as she looks on, petrified. From then on, his luck begins to turn.

The film is something of a slow burner until this moment but suddenly sinister occurrences come thick and fast. Yet even after a close shave with a van, an accusation of rape and an unearthly visitation, Norman refuses to abandon his rationality. It isn't until the giant stone statue over the college entrance fulfils the title's promise that he finally believes.

Peter Wyngarde's performance in this sequence is spectacular, his whole body conveying sheer terror as he is pursued through the deserted corridors of the college. He ends up in his own classroom, where the phrase 'I do not believe', written by him at the film's start, is still chalked mockingly on the blackboard.

Wyngarde was a well-established TV actor and already had horror credentials before appearing in this British classic, delivering more than a few shocks as the ghostly presence of Peter Quint in Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961). Here, in his first leading role on the big screen, his striking clean-cut looks and slender stature made him perfect casting as the high-flying academic who undergoes a psychological overhaul.

The screenplay couldn't have been in better hands: credit goes to Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont, two eminent sci-fi writers who contributed to TV series *The Twilight Zone*, and crime writer George Baxt (*The City of the Dead*, *The Shadow of the Cat*). The script is cleverly peppered with sly allusions to superstition and witchcraft: 'Have you sold your soul to the Devil?' one of Norman's colleagues asks jokingly, eliciting nervous glances from his wife; after Norman crashes his car, he regains consciousness to see the St Christopher's medal of the other driver dangling tauntingly before his eyes.

Director Sidney Hayers uses an array of techniques to enhance the chilling effect. The sound design is skilful, in particular the use of a reel-to-reel tape containing Norman's speech on neurosis to conjure up evil – modern technology employed for ancient ends. Black-and-white cinematography is the purest way to portray the battle against dark forces, and much of the action takes place in Norman and Tansy's house, amplifying their isolation and vulnerability.

In *Night of the Eagle*, middle-class homes and communities cease to be places of comfort and security; the film further paved the way for later domestic revelations such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (1974). So beware – those twitching curtains can harbour more than just nosey neighbours.

Josephine Botting, bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

Fritz Leiber, one of the most ingenious of science-fiction authors, is credited with the basis of this occult thriller; the fact that three screenwriters have worked on its expansion possibly explains why the film is not all one had hoped it might be. The producers have had little success making the subject-matter believable, for all that much of the action is underplayed, and it is impossible to accept the situation of two presumably intelligent women succumbing to the lure of black magic. But director Sidney Hayer's stage management is fresh and exciting for the most part, skilful in its reliance on suggestion, naggingly effective as a study of psychic attack. Peter Wyngarde succeeds in conveying the young professor's confusion and doubt, while Margaret Johnston enjoys herself along broader lines as the wild-eyed, madly frustrated Flora.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1962**

NIGHT OF THE EAGLE

Directed by: Sidney Hayers

©: Anglo Amalgamated Film Distributors

Made by: Independent Artists

Executive Producers: Julian Wintle, Leslie Parkyn

Produced by: Albert Fennell

Production Manager: Geoffrey Haine

Production Supervisor: Arthur Alcott

Assistant Director: David Bracknell

Continuity: Jane Buck

Screenplay by: Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, George Baxt

Based on a story by: Fritz Leiber

Director of Photography: Reginald Wyer

Camera Operator: Gerry Turpin

Film Editor: Ralph Sheldon

Art Director: Jack Shampian

Set Dresser: Peter Lamont

Dress Designer: Sophie Devine

Wardrobe: Maude Churchill

Make-up: Basil Newall

Hair Stylist: Iris Tilley

Music Composed by: William Alwyn

Conducted by: Muir Mathieson

Sound Recordists: Eric Bayman, Len Shilton

Sound Editor: Alastair McIntyre

Sound Editor: Ted Mason

Studio: Elstree Studios

Cast

Peter Wyngarde (*Professor Norman Taylor*)

Janet Blair (*Tansy Taylor*)

Margaret Johnston (*Professor Flora Carr*)

Anthony Nicholls (*Harvey Sawtelle*)

Colin Gordon (*Professor Lindsay Carr*)

Kathleen Byron (*Evelyn Sawtelle*)

Reginald Beckwith (*Harold Gunnison*)

Jessica Dunning (*Hilda Gunnison*)

Norman Bird (*doctor*)

Judith Stott (*Margaret Abbott*)

Bill Mitchell (*Bill Jennings*)

uncredited:

George Roubicek (*laundry man*)

Frank Singuineau (*truck driver*)

Gary Woolf (*driver's mate*)

UK 1962©

84 mins

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

The Uninvited

Thu 1 Dec 18:05; Sat 17 Dec 14:30 (+ intro by broadcaster and writer, Louise Blain)

Kwaidan (Kaidan)

Thu 1 Dec 20:00; Tue 13 Dec 17:40

Night of the Eagle

Fri 2 Dec 21:00; Sat 10 Dec 12:10

Daughters of Darkness (Les lèvres rouges)

Sat 3 Dec 20:45; Tue 13 Dec 21:00

Transness in Horror

Tue 6 Dec 18:20

Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)

Tue 6 Dec 20:45; Thu 22 Dec 18:15

Philosophical Screens: The Lure

Wed 7 Dec 20:10 Blue Room

The Lure (Córki dancing)

Wed 7 Dec 18:15; Thu 22 Dec 20:45 (+ intro by

Dr Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies at King's College London)

Cat People

Wed 7 Dec 20:50; Mon 19 Dec (+ intro by Clarisse Loughrey, chief film critic for The Independent)

Black Sunday (La maschera del demonio)

Fri 9 Dec 21:00; Sun 18 Dec 18:30

Ring (Ringu)

Sat 10 Dec 20:40; Tue 13 Dec 21:05;

Tue 20 Dec 21:00

Atlantics (Atlantique) + Atlantiques

Sun 11 Dec 14:50; Tue 27 Dec 18:20

Sugar Hill

Sun 11 Dec 18:00; Sat 17 Dec 20:40

Häxan

Mon 12 Dec 18:10 (+ live score by The Begotten); Sat 17 Dec 11:45 (with live piano accompaniment)

Sweetheart

Mon 12 Dec 21:00; Tue 27 Dec 12:40

Arrebato

Wed 14 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by writer and broadcaster Anna Bogutskaya);

Fri 23 Dec 18:05

The Final Girls LIVE

Thu 15 Dec 20:30

One Cut of the Dead (Kamera o tomeru na!)

Fri 16 Dec 18:15; Fri 30 Dec 20:45

The Fog

Fri 16 Dec 21:00; Wed 28 Dec 18:10

Being Human + Q&A with Toby Whithouse and guests (tbc)

Sat 17 Dec 18:00

Day of the Dead

Mon 19 Dec 20:40; Thu 29 Dec 18:20

Society

Tue 20 Dec 18:15; Wed 28 Dec 20:50

Interview with the Vampire

Wed 21 Dec 18:10; Thu 29 Dec 20:40

Ginger Snaps

Wed 21 Dec 20:50; Tue 27 Dec 15:10

A Dark Song

Fri 23 Dec 20:45; Fri 30 Dec 18:20

City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors –

Screen Monsters

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30–20:30 Studio

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780