"... And the BBC Created Hammer": Examining the Interdependence of Public Service Broadcaster and Exploitation Film-maker
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The connection between the BBC and the Hammer film company is not often commented on beyond the passing association with each of the films which Hammer adapted individually from BBC properties. Yet the number of such properties as a whole and the importance of their position within the development of Hammer as a company has received less attention. This paper will investigate the way that Hammer's films based on BBC radio properties helped the company to establish itself as a successful British exploitation film-maker, while the adaptations of the Quatermass television serials led to the establishment of the Hammer identity as a British horror film producer. The paper will also examine the BBC attitude towards Hammer, as revealed through files at the BBC Written Archives Centre, which expose some of the tensions of the differing corporate identities. However, I will argue that it was these very tensions which were at the heart of the success of these properties in both media, and that the differing approaches to the material taken by the BBC and Hammer are suggestive of differing aspects of British post-War cultural identity.

The monopoly BBC Television Service has acquired something of an image of being a high-minded, socially-concerned body, governed by Reith's principle that the BBC should 'inform, educate and entertain', presumably in that order. The perception is that there was a certain purity of purpose there, corrupted by the arrival of an openly commercial competitor with the launch of ITV in 1955. However, this is a very restricted and idealistic view of the situation, particularly considering that the BBC was operating in a very constrained financial environment during its monopoly years. Even before the recording of programmes for trade became technically or economically possible, the BBC engaged in a keen trade in narratives, formats and merchandising.

Hammer Film Productions was the film production company formed by Enrique Carreras and Will Hinds in the 1930s, with sister company Exclusive handling distribution for Hammer and other studios. Throughout this paper I will be using the term 'Hammer' to loosely cover both Hammer and Exclusive, production and distribution, a decision made easier by the casual way that the separation of the companies seems to have been handled internally. For example, documents held by the BBC Written Archive Centre regarding the rights to The Quatermass Experiment and Quatermass II will shift between Hammer and Exclusive-headed paper even within the same correspondence between the same representatives of the BBC and Hammer.

Hammer began its career modestly, while also showing early indications of the route that the rest of its development would take, by adapting acts from stage and radio. Indeed, Jonathan Coe has claimed that 'One of the important things to remember about Hammer is that nobody working there ever had an original idea: everything had to be adapted from a proven formula.'¹ As Catherine Johnson has noted, the relationship between Exclusive and the BBC actually began with Exclusive supplying shorts and features for the pre-war television service.² In this way, it could be argued that it was Exclusive that helped to develop the BBC Television Service. However, the relationship soon began to work the other way as well, as Hammer began adapting popular BBC radio shows in the late 1940s.


²Johnson, 'Trading Auntie', p.445
These adaptations kept Hammer afloat through the next few years. They allowed the audience to see and revisit characters that they were familiar with from the radio, where repeats were rare. They also were part of the development and reinforcement of a BBC brand identity which included these adaptations and other marketing, projecting a concept of the corporation beyond its own productions. The control of this concept was complicated by the nature of copyright on these productions, as there was no copyright protection on the programme concepts or formats, only on the scripts, and the copyright for many of these scripts remained with the writers and performers rather than lying with the Corporation. This means that it was not only possible but common for there to be merchandising produced based on BBC productions where the Corporation had no right of approval or other means of governing the image which would be associated with their product. Not only that, but as the rights that the BBC held only applied to the programme scripts rather than underlying characters or formats, due to the copyright laws of the time, it was quite possible for companies to produce merchandise using, for example, the Dick Barton name without BBC approval, as long as they did not incorporate any material from the radio scripts.

For Hammer, the immediate appeal of adapting BBC radio series lay in name recognition, particularly as the series adapted tended to be ongoing ones. The first of these adaptations was *Dick Barton, Special Agent* in 1948, tying in to 'BBC radio's first daily serial', which 'regularly attracted an audience of fifteen million'.\(^\text{3}\) This pulpy detective adventure was part of the populist, escapist side of the BBC, the part that sought to entertain over informing and educating. The fit with Hammer's desire for profitable exploitation material was so good that the studio followed up with *Dick Barton Strikes Back* in 1949 and *Dick Barton at Bay* in 1950. These films did not use the radio series' cast, as they were still busy with their daily broadcasts. The first of the films was a success in its own right, a success that was aided by producing it for £20,000 when the standard purchase of a feature such as this for the second-run market was £25,000, putting the film in profit before it was even screened.\(^\text{4}\)

Buoyed by the success of *Dick Barton, Special Agent*, Hammer went on to produce more film spin-offs of successful radio series and serials. [SLIDE] As you can see, between 1948 and 1955, Hammer produced 14 adaptations of radio programmes, and one television adaptation. Another 14 were produced by the company after that [SLIDE], but that was over the 20 years from 1955 to 1975, not the seven years of the first 14. And it was that first television adaptation, *The Quatermass Xperiment*, that was to launch Hammer into its major success as the House of Horror. Indeed, Jonathan Coe has argued that it was *The Quatermass Xperiment* and the sour note of national failure that it contained that formed [SLIDE] 'the keynote of what was later to become the Hammer project: the smuggling-in of something faintly subversive, a distant recognition of our national vices or secrets or uncertainties, under the guise of a sensational entertainment.'\(^\text{5}\)

But, while it could be expected that this success came through the excess that Hammer applied to their film adaptation of the highly successful television serial, one of the key elements in Hammer being allowed the adaptation was that more prestigious studios found the television material was too strong for the cinema screen. Correspondence held by the

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\(^{4}\)Maxford, *Hammer, House of Horror*, p.15

\(^{5}\)Coe, 'Hammer's Cosy Violence', pp.135-136
BBC Written Archives Centre shows that a number of prospective companies dropped out of negotiations to adapt the serial because the nature of the material would result in an X-certificate, restricting the potential audience to adults only. The only company to remain in negotiations for the duration was Hammer, which saw the potential X-certificate less as a restriction and more as an exploitable marketing opportunity, as shown by their eventual capitalising on the certificate in their spelling of the film’s title.

It wasn’t just narratives and characters that Hammer took from the BBC in these formative years. Peter Cushing was known at the time of 1957’s *The Curse of Frankenstein* primarily as a television actor. In relation to his performance in the television play *The Creature*, which Hammer would adapt as *The Abominable Snowman*, Peter Cushing was referred to by *The Times* as ‘that good television actor Mr. Peter Cushing’.  

Cushing had also won the *Daily Mail* National TV Award for 1953 and 1954, together with the Guild of Television Producers and Directors Award in 1955, for his part in the notorious BBC television production of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

James Bernard, who composed the music for *The Quatermass Xperiment*, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and many other Hammer films, was also found through the BBC, where he had composed scores for a number of radio plays. As Wayne Kinsey would have it, ‘James Bernard would soon define the very sound of Hammer horror.’ While probably not as recognisable to the general public as someone like Cushing, or a character like Dick Barton or PC49 or Quatermass, Bernard’s hiring still illustrates that Hammer were more than willing to look to the BBC for proven talent.

Another aspect of the approval of Hammer as the producers of the screen version of *The Quatermass Experiment* was that they were a known quantity. As the Assistant Head of Programme Contracts noted [SLIDE]:

Exclusive Films Ltd. were the firm which made the 'Dick Barton' films. Although those films were not considered altogether satisfactory, the Corporation made £7000 out of them and we are assured that since that time their standard of production has improved. This quotation shows that the BBC was interested in both the commercial profit to be raised from the adaptation as well as the quality of the eventual film. In fact, it suggests that profits were more important than standards, as there seems to have been no attempt to verify the assurance that the company's standards had improved.

However, this does not mean that concerns over taste were completely abandoned with the signing of contracts between the companies, and this brings me on to the second aspect of this paper. Having outlined the historical element of the relationship between Hammer and the BBC, I would now like to consider what this tells us about taste formations and cultural tensions in the period. Were Hammer simply the exploiters of popular successes, stripping them of any higher-brow elements and aiming for a quick buck? Were the BBC simply guardians of quality, concerned with the national character and taste over profit?

Of course the answer to both questions is ‘no’, although there are ways in which both

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6Anon., “Quest Play on Television”, *The Times*, 31 January 1955, p.10


9Turnell, O., 'Quatermass Experiment Film', 14 April 1954,BBC WAC R126/401/1
companies fit with those easy concepts of their places in British culture. This is perhaps most clearly indicated by a comment made by the BBC to Hammer in relation to the promotion of *The Quatermass Experiment* [SLIDE]:

I am sorry to say that we do not care for the suggested billing "Based on the BBC Television Sensation by Nigel Kneale". We wish the formula already agreed to be used, that is to say, "Based on the BBC Television Play by Nigel Kneale".\^10

This clearly shows a BBC looking to avoid association with sensationalism, and a Hammer keen to exploit any available angle to enhance the chances of their product being a success.

But let's return to that list of Hammer's first adaptations. [SLIDE] Even from the titles alone, with no familiarity with the original radio productions, it is clear that these are genre pieces: spy thrillers, detective stories, police stories, space stories. Actually, even *Spaceways* is a murder mystery, while the innocuous-sounding *Celia* is about a woman going undercover to investigate a relationship, only to discover that the husband is after the wife's money and is going to murder her! The two Lyons films [SLIDE] were based on a radio comedy series, and so depended more on name recognition than on the title for any indication of what sort of film it would be, although the pun of *Life With the Lyons* may well have suggested a comedic aspect. (You may wonder about that being a US one-sheet that seems familiar with a BBC radio series, but both Ben Lyons and Bebe Daniels were successful Hollywood actors and producers before moving to Britain in the 1940s, providing an additional potential layer of recognition, and international at that, that would have been appealing to Hammer.)

These titles were largely those of the original radio series; after all, there's little point in taking a property and then not using its familiar title to aid your publicity. Some of these productions were direct adaptations of radio narratives, such as *Celia* and *Room to Let*, while others were film-specific adventures of radio characters. Even so, the film adventures seem, as far as I have been able to tell, to have been little different from the type of story that the characters would have found themselves in on the radio. So Hammer was not really responsible for making significant changes to the properties which had been formed by the BBC.

If this is the case, how can we see the BBC and Hammer as representing different aspects of British culture in the period? Hammer were exploiting the success of the BBC productions, but was the BBC not doing the same? And, as can be seen from this internal BBC memo [SLIDE] the Corporation acknowledged that the exploitation of their properties by Hammer actually did them good in terms of publicity and financial benefit.

Part of the difference lies in execution. For example, take the (cheaper) television ending of *The Quatermass Experiment*, where the alien hanging in Westminster Abbey is defeated by Quatermass arguing with the remaining humanity of the astronauts it has absorbed; Jonathan Coe states that this was 'considered far too highbrow for the film version'.\^11 Instead, the movie Quatermass electrocutes it. Such an action plays better on the big screen, and that is one of the issues that had to be dealt with: visualisation. At the time, the cinema screen offered significantly better images than television, not just bigger, so what was suggestive, allusive on television became clear on the big screen. While it can be argued that this actually removed some of the effectiveness of the image, by reducing the

\^10G.M.Turnell to Anthony Hinds, Letter, 7 December 1954, BBC WAC R126/401/1

\^11Coe, 'Hammer's Cosy Violence', p.136
demands on the viewers' imagination, it was this very point which caused the BBC to consider the film adaptations as lesser than the radio or television originals.

While many had supported the development of the Television Service and saw benefits to the addition of vision to sound, as I have spoken about at a previous study day, there was also a consideration within the BBC that vision was of lower status than radio. At least one of the reasons behind this was the very idea that providing the images to go along with the sounds was less demanding to the audience, and so provided less mental exercise. Television and films were therefore inherently better suited to the less educated, and had lower cultural value than books or radio. But most of the productions that we are dealing with here originated on the supposedly higher cultural value radio, if on the more populist Light Service.

What this shows is that both Hammer and the BBC were operating a balancing act between taste formations. The BBC needed to present a certain populist element in order to attract viewers and listeners, which then justified the continuation of BBC funding through the licence fee. The Corporation also recognised the value of exploiting their properties, financially and in terms of reputation, but I would argue that they were willing to accept some forms which were more openly sensational and exploitative because the films were perceived as ephemeral, even more so than radio programming. A radio series could continue, its characters return, but a film would make its run in the cinemas, and then disappear. So the film that exploited the sensational elements of the characters would raise some interest, add some publicity, and then fade, while radio carried on.

For Hammer, the short-lived nature of their exploitation was a good way of making money by emphasising the sensationalist aspects of these narratives and characters. They received months, even years, of free publicity reaching many millions in their homes, through the original radio series. But, if the film was a flop, there was another one coming along, another property to adapt. Obviously, there was no desire for the film to flop, so they focussed on providing what cinema could provide but radio and TV could not, although within a limited budget - a bit of spectacle. In later years, this would result in adaptations of sitcoms which seemed invariably to take the cast on holiday - *The Lyons in Paris* is a very early example of this. It didn't matter if the spectacle was short-lived, as long as the film made money.

The difference between the two companies, at least regarding these properties, lay in their approach to them. The BBC was glad to be popular, but was rather ashamed of being populist. Hammer, on the other hand, knew what it was making and so attacked it with gusto. When a BBFC reader commented that the script for *The Curse of Frankenstein* 'is a loathsome story and I regret that it should have come from a British team.' Tony Hinds replied that 'as I am setting out to make a "blood chiller" I must incorporate a certain amount of visual horror as that is what the public will be paying to see.' In other words, Hammer was quite happy to be seen as commercial, something the BBC could not be.

Without BBC properties to develop, Hammer would likely have continued to find other material to adapt and develop. Whether they would have thrived without the name recognition of these BBC adaptations, though, is another question. If we accept that this promotional boost was important to Hammer, than it seems that the BBC did, in their

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relationship with Hammer, create something which, like Frankenstein, they regarded with horror. But it was also something that they were, like Cushing's Frankenstein in particular, unable to completely abandon.

Familiarity clearly plays its part in these film and television adaptations and their success. Indeed, Jonathan Coe considers this to be one of the attributes that contribute to the 'reassuring pleasures' of Hammer films. He also suggests that this familiarity and cosiness are part of what make 'Hammer films ... absolutely typical of English culture in the way they insist that extremes of violence and extremes of cosiness can and must co-exist.'

'The British horror film is a rich source of exploration of the ways in which conceptions of sexuality, class, power and even race are a site of contention in British culture.'

The business of trading intellectual property worked on a number of levels. Firstly, as an expression of copyright, a proclamation of ownership. Secondly, as an extension of BBC branding, connecting the institution into the wider culture. Thirdly, it operated as a source of revenue, supplementing the corporation's income from the licence fee and thereby allowing it to continue its experimentation and expansion of services, including the television service. Some trading also brought in foreign income, particularly valuable dollars, which fed in to Britain's straightened post-war economy. A 1955 article in the Radio Times notes that the two year old Television Transcription Service, responsible for distributing films and telerecordings of BBC programming, was financially self-supporting from its sales to thirteen countries. To keep to the idea of trading in and developing intellectual property, in 1950, News Review wrote of the success of Annette Mills' Muffin the Mule merchandise, including slippers, wallpaper, nightgowns, toys, music, records, books, a comic and, most importantly of all, 'earning dollars [through] a series of 26 quarter-hour Muffin films, which are to be put out on American television, and have international syndication.'

So this shows that the BBC was interested in exploiting intellectual property for a number of reasons during the monopoly period. But where is the connection to Hammer, surely one of if not the most famous of Britain's exploitation filmmakers? A link between the public-service orientated BBC and Hammer would, at first glance, seem unlikely, but, as Catherine Johnson notes, 'Between 1948 and 1954 Exclusive/Hammer adapted 15 radio programmes for cinema.' Not only that, but it was radio adaptations that kept Hammer

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14 Coe, Hammer's Cosy Violence, p.137

15 Coe, Hammer's Cosy Violence', p.137


19 Johnson, Catherine, 'Trading Auntie: the exploitation and protection of intellectual property rights during the BBC's monopoly years', New Review of Film and Television Studies,
going in its early years, while the breakthrough success that led the studio down its famous horror route was not its 1957 *The Curse of Frankenstein*, although that film did introduce many of the key Hammer horror ingredients. The breakthrough came with the 1955 *The Quatermass Xperiment*, an adaptation of a highly successful BBC serial which, according to Wayne Kinsey, marks the start of Hammer's 'classic' period. This paper will examine this relationship, and particularly the issues that it raised around the cultural position of both Hammer and the BBC in the late-1940s and early-1950s, issues which required careful negotiation from the companies themselves as they sought to develop and maintain their own identities.

James Sangster recalled that the success of *The Quatermass Xperiment* led Hammer to look initially for another science fiction project, which became *X the Unknown*. There were attempts to make this a Quatermass sequel, but Nigel Kneale, the character’s creator, refused the right to use the character. On reading the script for *X the Unknown*, in order to indicate potential problem areas, Audrey Field of the BBFC noted that Hammer, ‘having prospered exceedingly on the proceeds of Quatermass, now appear to have been looking at *Quatermass II*’. Another BBFC reader noted that the script for *X the Unknown* contained ‘a mixture of scientific hokum and sadism’, connecting it with the sort of attitudes that would be raised about the BBC’s version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1954.

With regard to a script for *The Curse of Frankenstein*, one BBFC reader noted that 'This

**Bibliography**

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22Kinsey, *Hammer Films*, p.41