

Tony Dalton, *Terence Fisher: Master of Gothic Cinema* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2021), pp. 503, ISBN: 9781913051099 (pb), £32.99.

This is the authorised biography of Terence Fisher by his long-time friend Tony Dalton, who has also written biographies of Freddie Francis and Ray Harryhausen, as well as four further books on the latter. Extremely thoroughly researched, highly readable and copiously illustrated, it discusses all the films on which Fisher worked, some in considerable detail. His early films, both as editor and director, are dealt with chronologically, the later ones in thematic blocs such as *Dracula and His Disciples*; *Frankenstein, Creator of Man*; and *The Realm of Science Fiction*. The book also quotes liberally from interviews with Fisher, both by Dalton himself and those appearing in such venerable publications as *Midi-Minuit Fantastique* and *Little Shoppe of Horrors*. All in all, this is an exhaustive – and, at over 500 pages, sometimes exhausting – work which should be of interest to all those who want to know not only about Fisher and his films, but the areas of cinema (and indeed television) in which he worked.

Fisher has been well served in print, first of all in David Pirie’s original *A Heritage of Horror* (1973), which Fisher, according to Dalton (453), regarded as the ‘definitive’ analysis of the British horror film, then in Peter Hutchings’ *Terence Fisher* (2001) and more recently in Wheeler Winston Dixon’s *The Films of Terence Fisher* (2017). Dalton discusses critical writing about Fisher at various points in his book, although as this is primarily a biography and not a work of critical exegesis, his arguments on this subject are not developed at any great length or in any systematic fashion. However, they are worth dwelling on, both for what they can tell us both about critical writings of various kinds on popular British cinema and about the qualities of Fisher’s films.

Fisher was not particularly kindly treated by many film critics during the periods in which he worked as a director, when indeed he was treated at all. As Dalton notes: ‘Throughout his directing career most of his pictures were largely dismissed by contemporary critics as cheap,

vulgar, and sensational, including the early ones'. And when after long years of being largely ignored or treated peremptorily, his films, namely the early *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* entries for Hammer, did finally garner a great deal of critical comment, it was largely negative, although the vituperation was aimed more at the company as a whole rather than at Fisher personally. On the other hand, Dalton's numerous quotations from contemporaneous reviews of Fisher's films do prompt one to question – although the author himself does not – whether it might be useful to distinguish between the different kinds of critical discourse at work here. I haven't attempted to quantify this, but I did gain the distinct impression that, particularly in the case of Fisher's earlier films, the UK trade press, in the shape of *Today's Cinema* and *Kinematograph Weekly*, frequently showed a greater appreciation of his work than did the critics of the daily press and the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (which in those days could usually be relied upon for negative judgements on certain kinds of works). If this is indeed the case, a possible reason could be that the trade press critics had a greater understanding of both the area of cinema in which Fisher worked and of what would appeal to the audiences for whom these films were intended.

However, as Dalton rightly points out:

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, his work is considered a major influence, not only on the history of Hammer Films, but on the whole horror genre, especially the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> Century cycle ... He would have been pleased by his wider acceptance today, but he also would have been tickled pink because it proved all those pompous critics wrong. (14)

But the interesting question left unexplored here is how this re-evaluation came about. I would argue that it was because of ground-breaking books such as *A Heritage of Horror*, specialist publications such as *Midi-Minuit Fantastique* and *Little Shoppe of Horrors*, and the gradual percolation into the critical mainstream of the ideas explored within them – for example, David Pirie was on the film staff of *Time Out* and wrote regularly on horror for both it and the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (by then much improved). However, although Dalton clearly admires this new strand of critical work, he is hostile to the kind of writing about Fisher which he describes as 'far

too academic (“imagining what was never intended” as Terry would have said, or just plain silly’, noting that Fisher would always tell interviewers that his films were ‘what you see, nothing more and nothing less. No hidden meaning, no significant undercurrent, just an interpretation of the written word (the screenplay)’ (13). However, unhelpfully he doesn’t identify any specific critical writing in order to illustrate this point.

Pitching into a battle that one thought was long over is perhaps not the most encouraging way to start to a book such as this, but matters do soon improve considerably. Like Hutchings and Dixon, Dalton is particularly good on Fisher’s early work as both editor and director, and his book has the added advantage, from a biographical point of view, of containing interesting new material on Fisher’s working life before he entered the film industry (20-35).

As Dalton observes, working as an editor on a film gave Fisher the chance to observe on a daily basis and at close hand everything that the director had done, and when he himself became a director he ‘filmed with an editor’s eye, with no superfluous scenes or shots’ (73), which was exactly what was needed when working on the kind of tight budgets and short schedules that were the norm at the relatively small companies that employed him. In this respect, Dalton quotes Hammer producer and screenwriter Anthony Hinds to the effect that:

I wanted our directors to shoot, in general, only what we could use – to, in a sense, cut the film while filming it. As a former editor, Terry was a genius at doing this ... Terry had the film cut in his head before filming it – no wasted time, no wasted money. Terry would move the camera only when necessary and then only to produce some effect or audience response. Not just to move it. He didn’t believe in shock cuts or zoom lenses as a rule ... He had a wonderful visual sense, a sense of composition. (93)

The result is a cinema which is not overtly ‘stylish’ and marked by obvious directorial flourishes, which is one reason why Fisher’s films prior to his Gothic works for Hammer tended to be overlooked by critics of the time – and, indeed, remained so for quite some considerable time. As

Hutchings points out, one of the main reasons why Fisher's direction was often dismissed as dull and 'un-cinematic' is that many of his camera set-ups and movements have an 'unobtrusive, self-effacing quality. They are not there to draw the attentions of the audience or critics to Fisher's artistry ... Instead they service the narrative, convey atmosphere and also communicate an attitude to the events of and participants in the drama'. However, it is notable that, as Dalton (472) reveals, of Martin Scorsese's five favourite Fisher films, four are relatively early works: *To the Public Danger* (1948), *So Long at the Fair* (1950), *Stolen Face* (1952) and *Four Sided Triangle* (1953). Dalton himself is very sensitive to the visual qualities of even Fisher's humbler works (whilst fully recognising that he was not infrequently hamstrung by the intractable qualities of the material which he was handed), explains very clearly his particular *modus operandi* (for example, 456-9) and convincingly stands up his claim that his films have 'a distinctive cinematic style' (17). This is particularly the case when it comes to Fisher's Gothic works for Hammer, which, Dalton argues,

undeniably have a definite, distinctive look and feel to them – a unity of style – that isn't just down to the Gothic settings and themes. There's a directorial approach in a Terence Fisher picture that is not apparent on other Hammer movies, most notably among the Gothic horror helmed by other directors. (452)

This is a claim which is also amply borne out by Hutchings' analyses of the *mise-en-scène* of *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *The Devil Rides Out* (1968) in particular.

Whether this makes Fisher an auteur is, however, an arguable point. In Dalton's view his films 'contain a distinct character that is peculiar to Terry – they are visually effective with a deep, rich, atmospheric yet straightforward approach – so we are, I believe, able to say he was most definitely an auteur' (452). But if by 'auteur' is meant a director who has not only a recognisable style but also a particular and personal world view that they express via their films, then Dalton's own endorsement of Fisher's insistence above that his films contain 'no hidden meaning, no

significant undercurrent, just an interpretation of the written word' surely weighs against considering him an auteur in the fullest sense of the word. And this brings us back to the question posed by Peter Hutchings at the start of his book on Fisher, namely is he an auteur or a *metteur-en-scène*? This is a question which I discussed at some length in my review of that book in *JBCTV* 2: 1, 2005, in which I concurred with Hutchings' judgment that Fisher was not a full-blown auteur but 'a film-maker who via the exercise of his professional skills within particular contexts helped to fashion films that in part (and, in some cases, in very large part) register his organisational presence within the production process', particularly through his very considerable compositional and staging abilities. And that, in my reading, is precisely the view of Fisher which emerges from Tony Dalton's book: a highly talented *metteur-en-scène* whose film-making skills were such as to make themselves largely invisible in the service of the narrative. And thus Fisher himself long remained invisible in critical discourse, suffering exactly the same fate as many of his Hollywood directorial equivalents until they were 'discovered' by a new generation of French critics, who then laid the way for their British and American equivalents. However, in the final analysis, whether Fisher is now valued as an auteur or as a *metteur-en-scène* counts for far less than the fact that he is valued at all, and Tony Dalton's book is a valuable addition to the long process of recovery and recognition.

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