

Oddbods, Bungs and Frying Tonight! Or... Is *Carry On Screaming!* a Cult Film?

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Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik argue that typically a film may become a 'cult film' through four main factors: *Anatomy* deals with the actual film itself, its formal properties and how it looks; *Consumption* refers to how the film was received, and how audiences and critics perceived it; *Political Economy* – or, the financial conditions of the film, include ownership, promotion, time and space of exhibition; and finally, *Cultural Status* speaks of the ways that a film 'fits' into its contextual surroundings (Mathijs and Mendik 2009: 1). With these four positions in mind, I aim to examine if *Carry On Screaming!* (Dir. Gerald Thomas, 1966) falls into both the populist and cult remit. As a whole, the *Carry On* films were never entirely given critical acclaim at the time, and most reviews indicate a general negativity or dismissiveness towards them. And yet, the films have stood the test of time. In this article I look back to 1966, and even earlier to the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian eras, to examine the cult and mainstream success of *Carry on Screaming!*

The *Carry On* films were a 31-strong comedy film series directed by Gerald Thomas, based around the traditions of Donald McGill's saucy seaside postcards and the British music hall. They were unashamedly and unabashedly fun movies aimed at a broad audience, and were created to provide laughs at the ruder end of the double entendre and innuendo-laden spectrum. They never purported to be High Art, but rather celebrated the foibles of living in

Britain during a period of great social upheaval. The films had an unbroken 20 year run, beginning in 1958 with *Carry On Sergeant* (based around the lives of conscripts in a post-war austerity Britain), and ended in 1978 with a parody of the French arthouse soft-core skinflick, *Emmanuelle*. There was one more attempt at reinvigorating the formula in 1992, with *Carry On Columbus*, but the film was not a success, both economically and in terms of reception for fans of the series.

The films were a mixture of realism (*Carry On Girls* [1973] and *Carry On At Your Convenience* [1971]), and parody (*Carry On Cleo* [1964] debunks the Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton farrago, and other such targets included the *James Bond* canon, the British stiff upper lipped epic, and the American Wild West). They were the brainchild of a dedicated team of professionals: Gerald Thomas's unobtrusive approach, which basically left the actors to 'do' the comedy, has arguably lifted him to auteur status; Peter Rogers held the purse strings, rather too tightly for some; Norman Hudis wrote the first six movies; Talbot Rothwell jumped on board to replace Hudis, and with his favoured approach being the McGill saucy postcard and the music hall, often repeated the same jokes again and again to the whooping laughter of his audience and the dismay of many a critic.

The actors were well known, either through their film, TV or radio work. The 'head' of the team was the South African born Sid James, who not only had the dirtiest laugh cinema has ever known, but

had become a much loved mainstay of British life through his work with Ealing and Tony Hancock. Kenneth Williams, with his nostrils flaring wider than the Dartmouth tunnel, used his 'snide' persona to bring his authoritarian characters to life, in which he was usually mercilessly mocked and ridiculed. Kenneth Connor and Peter Butterworth played the much put upon married men, while Jim Dale was always their hapless, hopeless, younger, handsome version. Charles Hawtrey's bespectacled and skinny man was always the outsider to their utopian-collective, commenting on the action whilst never quite being a part of it. Barbara Windsor played the sexually active buxom blond, with Joan Sims as the harridan wife or girlfriend; and Hattie Jacques was marvellous as a beleaguered Matronly figure. These all fit in with McGill caricatures¹, but also just as importantly with Vladimir Propp's character-theory; the latter referring to a system of character classification derived in relation to Russian folktales (Propp 1968: 79-80), which remains particularly relevant to the *Carry On* films. James is both 'Rogue' and 'Hero'; Williams is 'Trickster'; Windsor is the 'Damsel in Distress'; Hawtrey is always the 'Fool'.

The plot of *Carry on Screaming!* is straightforward. Dr. Watt (Kenneth Williams), a dead Victorian scientist, lives in Bide-a-Wee Rest Home in Holcombe (pronounced 'hokum') Wood. Through using his revivification process, his lumbering creation—Oddbod (Tom Clegg)—stalks the woods to kidnap women. These women are then turned into plastic shop dummies for sale around the milliners' shops of London. One girl, Doris (Angela Douglas) is taken and her beau, Peter Potter (Jim Dale) enlists the aid of the local helpless and hapless police to track her down. As Detective Sergeant Sidney Bung (Harry H. Corbett, standing in for Sid James on this occasion) and Constable Slowbotham (Peter Butterworth) close in, Watt's raven-haired, voluptuous sister Valeria (Fenella Fielding) casts her spell over Bung, turning him into a werewolf. The final conflagration sees Bung, Potter and Slowbotham trapped in the manor house, Valeria about to kill them, and Watt drowning in a vat of his own vitrifying liquid.

What raises the movie to arguably the most successful of horror parodies are a number of factors. Firstly, the sheer *look* of the film is both solid and

spectacular. The art direction has successfully captured Bernard Robinson's eye-catching Hammer sets with exact precision. The world invoked by the dank cellar of Dr Watt's 'Bide-a-Wee Rest Home' would not be amiss in any of Hammer's movies. The set is huge, with dank and damp ridden walls housing all manner of weird, sparkling and noisy electronic equipment, echoing Kenneth Strickfaden's electrical devices in Universal's 1930s *Frankenstein* movies. A set of steps lead the eye down into the cellar and just beyond them is a vat of bubbling, vitrifying liquid, to the side of which is an anteroom with a door that opens at the flick of a switch. Showing a good knowledge of horror clichés for the audience to identify, these elements allow a sense of visual beauty within the scene. Indeed, the camera lovingly wanders across the set on numerous occasions giving the viewer not only a sense of depth within the confines of the camera framing but also the feeling that the filmmakers on both sides of the camera wanted to evoke not just Hammer's visions but a affectionately crafted, concrete and horrible world. This world is created via the use of *mise-en-scène* conjuring up, it could be argued, an air of faded Victorian gentility laced with the repressions of Victorian England re-interpreted for a modern 1960s audience, thus creating a true sense of horror played purely for ghoulish entertainment.

This horror is invoked at the opening of the movie with a perfectly lit and realised scene, which would not be out of place within any horror movie of the period. The Director of Photography was Alan Hume, who had recently lensed *Kiss of the Vampire* (Dir. Don Sharp, 1963) for Hammer and *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (Dir. Freddie Francis, 1965) for their rivals Amicus, so he was well-versed in the horror cinema 'look'. The first image is of Dr Watt's re-constituted creation—Oddbod—lumbering through a stagy wood. The monster is a direct parody of Christopher Lee's Creature from the seminal *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Dir. Terence Fisher, 1957). It captures the hapless heroine and lurches off into the night. This homage to the Frankenstein myth is beautifully realised to entice and envelop the audience into the feeling of familiarity within sixties horror movies, whilst safely reminding them that they are watching the familiar comedy they have come to expect.

Therefore, in this respect, Rothwell realises that the audience knows what to anticipate at the very mention of the phrase 'Carry On', whilst at the same time understanding that they also await the ghoulish delights that horror films evoke.

There is also the usual ineffective police force, with the character Detective Sergeant Bung forming an antithesis of the style of 1960s 'realist' police dramas such as *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC 1955-1976), although the theme tunes from *Z-Cars* (BBC One 1962-1978) and *Steptoe and Son* (BBC One 1962-1974) (for which Corbett is most famous) are employed to become another direct reference to the familiarly cultural, often iconic melange of 1960s television. His assistant Slowbotham demonstrates his utter incompetence in this respect by dressing in female attire (a staple of the canon), fainting when he sees Oddbod for the first time, and then, when standing in his female undergarments, bends his knees in the 'What have we here' pose that all stereotypical coppers do.

The film's narrative has the recognisable, essential quality of the audience 'knowing' where the film will eventually lead. This predictability is a key point of the *Carry On* series during this period; after all, this feeling of recognition allows the audience to become inveigled within the narrative under the assumption that the individual will know exactly where the filmmaker will allow the movie to lead them. That is, at the end of *Screaming!* good will triumph over evil, Dr. Watt will get his comeuppance, Potter will rescue his girlfriend and all will be right with the world. Despite this conservatism, the filmmakers do bring a touch of pre-postmodern irony into the proceedings, which makes it a definite part of the 'cult' canon both in construction terms and through audience identification and celebration.

There are numerous references to contemporary works: the theme music from other sources, the tropes of the chiller mysteries of radio programs like *The Inner Sanctum* (Blue Network 1941-1952) or *Lights Out* (Various 1934-1947), the Holmesian references from Hammer's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (BBC Home Service/BBC Light Programme 1952-1969) and Douglas Wilmer's take on *Sherlock Holmes* (BBC One, 1965-1968). Dr. Watt even states that 'Dr Who is my cousin, or he was. I've not seen him for some time', which together emphasise a genuine engagement

with 'outside' texts. This intertextual layering is passed off with a nod and a wink, but really when one considers that these are supposedly simple comedies, they reveal a far more complex depth than previously thought. Whilst the film might seem very much of its time for a modern audience for whom this intertextuality is a part and parcel of ironic postmodern nonsense and fluff like most of Quentin Tarantino's work, these elements also make it seem almost anachronistic. But for the contemporary audience they remain a part of the film's world, and therefore their world of the time. That the team used 'outside' texts within their own shows just how confident they were in both producing strong work that looked back to the past and ensuring that their main aim—laughter—was provided for in this ironic way.

The team go even further with this irony in the final scene. As Potter and Doris announce their marriage to Bung and his new wife, Valeria, they see Emily's vitrified model propped up in the parlour. Potter tells him that the vitrifying process can be reversed, but Bung says, 'No. We're on gas'. He looks directly at the camera and then says, 'I know. Horrible isn't it'. But then, with a wonderful close up on Joan Sims, she winks at the camera and therefore us. This stylistic, pre-postmodern approach to the Brechtian effect of distancing, involving breaking down the 'fourth wall' of the cinematic world, is typical of many 1960s movies (for example, Jack Gifford's withered look at the audience in Richard Lester's knockabout musical epic, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* [1966]). Here, it offers up the idea that the real horror in the 'real world' of the *Carry On* films is the moaning, battle-axe wife and not the sexually liberated sixties woman that Valeria represents. This is, of course, open to all manner of interpretation, but when placed in the context of the canon, and paying particular attention to McGill's caricatured types, it becomes obvious that whereas the chase was once all-important for Bung, the supposed-confines of marriage are obvious: Valeria represents sexual freedom for Bung, at least for the time being (and bearing in mind she had originally tried to kill him), whilst Emily becomes the ultimate threat to patriarchal order. And these were simple comedies? As Sid James says in *Carry On Cleo*... 'Blimus!'

The film was an assured comic triumph. The

cast were firing on all cylinders, they were supported by a pun-laden script, and the film looked great. In a way, they out-hammered Hammer Films themselves. In true cult and exploitation mode, the producers went all out to recoup their £197,500 production budget through an elaborate series of advertising campaigns. There were two posters produced. Released on a double-bill with *Fireball 500* (Dir. William Asher, 1966), the first poster emphasised the team through caricature (Figure 1), as had been done with others in the series, but interestingly included Charles Hawtrey who was not in the original script. Hawtrey had been brought back to the fold after a reporter claimed that he was one of the familiar stars that audiences loved, and would be very much missed by the public. So Rogers quickly put Hawtrey in the film, although he appears for less than five minutes of actual screen time. Interestingly, the second

poster was mocked up to look like the American television series *The Munsters* (CBS 1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (ABC 1964-1966) (Figure 2). The posters all play up the horror aspect, but what makes this even more potent is the fact that the title is so emphatic, and even Rogers once admitted that the 'Carry On' moniker was more famous and important than any one star, that audiences knew they were going to watch a knockabout comedy that mocked the then-burgeoning British horror film market.

The film's opening title song, credited as 'Anon' was originally thought to be sung by Jim Dale, himself an experienced (though minor) pop sensation. However, the song was sung by the session singer, Ray Pilgrim. It was released on a vinyl 45rpm by Columbia (Columbia DB7972) with Boz Burrell on vocals, before his notoriety as the bass player for the prog-rock bands King Crimson and Bad Company



Figure 1: First theatrical poster for *Carry on Screaming!*, released as a double bill with *Fireball 500*.



Figure 2: Second poster for *Carry on Screaming!*, reminiscent of both *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*.



Figure 3: Poster advertising 'Kreepy Kwivers' toys.



Figure 4: Carry on Screaming! comic strip tie-in.

The record did not chart.

As part of the production deal, some selected cinemas offered their patrons the chance to buy 'Kreepy Kwivers', a set of rubberised monsters for the princely sum of 12/6 (Figure 3).

As with many films of the period, there was also a comic strip tie-in. The last page is reproduced here (Figure 4). As you can see, it is basic, but the likenesses are sharp, and across five issues the film's main plot points are covered.

In terms of reception, critics such as Alexander Walker, Eric Shorter and Penelope Gilliat

disliked the film. They called it corny, unfunny, stilted... However, Nina Hibbins' review in *The Morning Star's* 1966 edition was positively glowing, when she wrote:

This is one of the better Carry Ons, bright and breezy with an earthy vulgarity. This unpretentious sort of clowning isn't exactly scintillating cinema. But it makes a change from the false sophistication and over-elaborate staging of all those extravagant spy and thriller spoofs we've been subjected to recently.



Figure 5: Special edition *Carry on Screaming!* stamps. Image courtesy of Royal Mail 2008.

It was also celebrated as part of a Royal Mail special collection of stamps in 2008 (Figure 5), which melded both the *Carry On* stable and Hammer Films together. When one compares their image of *Screaming!* to the Hammer entries of *Curse of Frankenstein*, *Dracula* (Dir. Terence Fisher, 1958) and *The Mummy* (Dir. Terence Fisher, 1959), then it becomes obvious just how affectionately the film is thought of, whilst also demonstrating just how close to Hammer's films *Screaming!* actually is.

So, is *Carry On Screaming!* a cult film? Taking Mathijs' four aspects of cult films into consideration, I would suggest that it certainly fits this remit. It is a niche film in many respects: horror has always had a disreputable face to it, and so has Low Brow knockabout comedy, that simply won't appeal to the darlings of intelligentsia. It genuinely celebrates the disreputable origins of Gothic literature, saucy postcards, music hall traditions, and chiller mysteries, knowingly utilising their conventions whilst both parodying them and critiquing them. Even though the film was aimed at the broadest possible audience, taking into account its tie-in merchandising and soundtracks (and broader tradition of films), they can certainly be considered crass to the extent of garnering a minority audience; even in 'bad taste', which perhaps aligns it more distinctly with notions

of cult.

The passing of time has made them something more than knockabout farces. They now come to represent a period of time in which Britain was undergoing social and political upheaval, where outlooks on sex and the class system were being eroded and challenged, questioned and mocked. The film does look superb: the art direction, photography, costumes, and props are all genre-specific. They look right. The actors become their McGillian creations, whilst reflecting the work of Cushing, Lee, and many others in the horror canon. The films had a silly marketing strategy that worked, tapping into the nation's affections of daft things like 'Kreepy Kwivers' monster toys, which serve no purpose other than to amuse and provoke memories of the trip to the cinema. Interestingly, this was the *Carry On* teams last film with their original distributor, Anglo-Amalgamated, who wanted to move more towards mainstream and culturally adroit films. Rogers took his films to Rank and *Carry On Doctor* (1967), *Up the Khyber* (1968) and *Camping* (1969) headed the box office in their respective years of release. That's a two-fingered salute, don't you think?

And that is the point of this film. It takes its genre seriously enough to openly parody it, but it does this with a genuine sense of love. The actors

give it their all, the design is superb, the script is fully-laden with Holcombe... sorry, hokum... and it is just so much fun. Even now, it gets good viewing figures on satellite channels, and is often repeated on terrestrial channels. But for me, the most important thing about *Carry On Screaming!* is simply this: in October 2015, a new *Carry On* film was been announced and is gearing up for production shortly (Clark 2015). Will it be a success? Maybe. But maybe not. No matter what happens, the fact that Kenneth Williams' immortal last line has entered into British life shows just how important this film is to the British, no, the world's horror canon. As he falls into his vat of vitrifying liquid, one cannot help but laugh when he shouts out... 'Frying tonight!

Notes

¹ For more information on graphic artist Donald McGill's 'saucy' seaside postcards, please see The Donald McGill Museum (2016).

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