

TRILOGY OF TERRORS

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of "Lake of Dracula", we shine a spotlight on Toho Studios' Bloodthirsty Trilogy.

By SEBASTIEN GODIN

Michio Yamamoto didn't have much of a taste for monsters. He had cut his teeth in the Japanese film industry in the late 1950s working on such films as Akira Kurosawa's masterful *THRONE OF BLOOD* as a 2nd assistant director, and wouldn't helm his own first feature till over a decade afterward: the frustratingly now-elusive crime drama *YAJU NO FUKKATSU*. Yamamoto had been vocal about his desire to direct thrillers that could have the same shocking impact on contemporary audiences as the work of such directors as Alfred Hitchcock had on him. But when Fumio Tanaka heard this, he mistook it as being a desire to scare people—and this misunderstanding launched what came to be known as the Bloodthirsty Trilogy.

Tanaka was a producer at Toho, arguably still the largest Japanese film production and distribution company, and upon overhearing Yamamoto's ambitions at a wrap party, decided to offer the director a horror project as his sophomore feature. Tanaka was a big fan of classic Gothic horror, especially vampire films. He wanted to produce a feature that could bring the Hammer style to Toho—which was not something that interested Yamamoto very much. Ultimately, the pair reached a compromise. The film would be a stirring melodramatic thriller about a man searching for answers regarding his supposedly dead fiancée...that just happened to have a bloodthirsty, wraith-like young woman at its core.

Writing duties would fall to Hiroshi Nagano and Ei Ogawa, the latter of whom would return for two follow-ups. Both writers were fairly prolific, but neither had any experience in the realm of Gothic horror, with Nagano having previously scripted the drama *JAGA WA HASHITA (THE CREATURE CALLED MAN)* and Ogawa having worked throughout the 1960s, mostly penning action films and thrillers. This strange combination of a fang-centric producer, a director whose passions lay with the Hitchcockian and a pair of writers with no horror experience would yield strikingly memorable results that stood out in an era when the vast majority of Japanese genre cinema was dominated by monsters of a much larger variety.

YUREI YASHIKI NO KYOFU; CHI O SUU NINGYO (literal translation: *FEAR OF THE GHOST HOUSE: BLOODTHIRSTY DOLL*), released in Japan in 1970 and known internationally as *THE VAMPIRE DOLL*, is a morose and genuinely frightening film that owes more to Roger Corman/AIP's Edgar Allan Poe series than it does to Hammer. It's about a man (Atsuo Nakamura) who travels to a rural village to meet his fiancée (the wonderful Yukiko Kobayashi of *DESTROY ALL MONSTERS* fame), only to be

informed that she has died in an unfortunate accident. That night, he begins to see his beloved's ghostly figure stalking the grounds surrounding her family's home. What follows is an intriguing mystery wrapped in the trappings of a Gothic horror story.

Yamamoto's direction is remarkably confident and his lack of passion for the genre isn't apparent in the slightest, delivering all the visual trappings one would hope for in a film like this. He demonstrates an admirable restraint in violence as well, saving the bloodletting for a single moment of crimson visceral satisfaction at the very end. That said, the film belongs to Kobayashi. With minimal screen time, her grinning, golden-eyed vampire (a visual motif that would be carried on into the next film) is one of the absolute best female monsters in the history of horror. Her flowing white gown and long black hair also anticipate the likes of Sadako and Kayako in future J-horror films *RINGU* and *JU-ON* respectively.

CHI O SUU NINGYO was a strong enough success in Japan that it didn't take long before a follow-up was planned, utilizing most of the same creative team—with the notable exception that

seemed more willing to lean into the traditional trappings of the vampire genre.

The 1971 film, released as *NOROI NO YAKATA: CHI O SUU ME* (literal translation: *CURSED HOUSE: BLOODTHIRSTY EYES*, and known internationally as *LAKE OF DRACULA*) tells the story of Akiko (Midori Fujita), who finds herself traumatized by memories of seeing a bloody-mouthed vampire at some point in her childhood. Years later, the bloodsucker (the glorious Shin Kishida) tracks her down with the intent to make her his new bride, beginning by slowly turning everyone she knows against her.

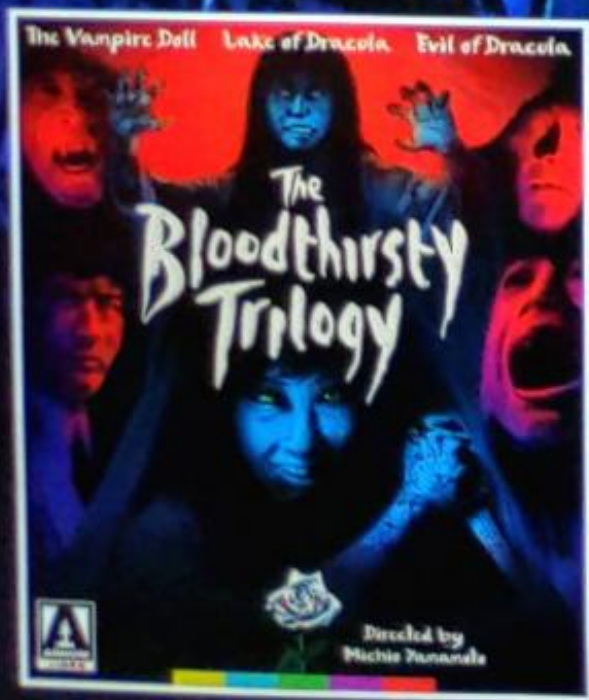
While not as atmospherically spooky or narratively intriguing as its predecessor, *LAKE* is a rather remarkable film in the sense that Yamamoto and co. seem to have almost immediately perfected the art of applying European horror sensibilities to their work. Giving their fanged antagonist eyes of gold once again makes him a uniquely striking monster, while he still brings to mind Christopher Lee's iconic take on Dracula (though it's well-documented that this villain is never called the D name). Kishida makes a wonderfully intimidating



Masaru Takesue took Nagano's place as Ogawa's co-writer. The final draft of the screenplay, originally titled *THE PHANTOM VAMPIRE* (what a great title for a pulpy, sanguine thriller), was submitted just five months before the film's theatrical release—a fairly insane turnaround time. Yamamoto returned to the director's chair, but this time he

vampire who, much like Lee's Count in some of the Hammer series, isn't given all that much screen time or real dialogue to chew on, but manages to perfectly capture the elemental ferocity of his monster with great ease. Much like the previous films, this one truly comes to life whenever its malefactor is on screen.

One of *LAKE*'s truly interesting





narrative gambits is making the source of the vampirism a hereditary curse. I won't go into great detail to spare those who have yet to see the film any spoilers, but the third-act reveal of the villain's lineage is effective and manages to even produce some sense of pathos for the monster, without resorting to outright sentimentality or attempts to give the character any genuinely sympathetic moments. It also provides the story some vague Lovecraftian qualities, though I can find no record of either screenwriter mentioning the author's work as a particular source of inspiration. However, they would save their most thematically interesting concepts for what would come next...

1974's CHI O SUU BARA (literal translation: BLOODTHIRSTY ROSE, and known internationally as EVIL OF DRACULA) is the finale and possibly the most undervalued entry of this trilogy. It follows Shiraki (LADY SNOWBLOOD's Toshio Kurosawa), a psychology professor who begins a new teaching position at a girls' school. Upon his arrival, he meets the principal (Kishida, which probably gives away who the antagonist is here), who is mourning his recently deceased wife. Soon, a string of vampiric attacks plagues the school, and Shiraki finds

himself spiraling down a rabbit hole of vampiric lore and bloodthirsty horror.

You'll notice that I didn't give much of EVIL's plot away in that short synopsis. The reason is that it's a film one should absolutely experience as the mystery it was intended to be. The one element of the villains' backstory I will reveal is the origin, if only because this element



cements this film's significance as a work of Japanese horror. Ogawa and Tekesue explain the source of the vampiric curse as a shipwrecked Christian man being forced to renounce his beliefs, due to his religion having been banned by the shogunate across Japan during the 1700s. In rooting the curse so deeply in Japanese history, the scripters helped the series finally become what it had set out to be from the beginning: an organic melding of European horror with Japanese sensibilities. The first two movies managed to do this on an aesthetic level, but this is the one that finally achieved it on a narrative and thematic level.

Over the ensuing decades, the Bloodthirsty Trilogy was something of an oddity for genre fans. While LAKE and EVIL received North American VHS releases through Paramount during the 1990s, it wasn't until Arrow Video released its lovely Blu-ray set in 2018 that all three films could be seen in a single official package. But even with the new attention granted by that release, there's no denying that these movies deserve far more attention. They are more than just effectively spooky vampire chillers; they are significant entries into the pantheon of Japanese genre cinema and horror cinema as a whole.

