

Mountains and Mysticism: Escapism and Authenticity in the Cinematic Exploration of the Himalaya [working title] – Tim Chamberlain | PhD Candidate, Birkbeck College, University of London

Hammer Horror was a genre of cinema which in its heyday was perhaps most commonly associated with kitsch melodramas about Count Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, but in 1957 Hammer ventured into the Himalaya in search of *The Abominable Snowman*. This was a movie which sought to render a realistic depiction of contemporary mountaineering and scientific exploration in the Himalaya as the backdrop to an adventurous search to find the fabled Yeti. Posters advertising the movie claimed it was 'Even more terrifying than *The Curse of Frankenstein!*' – Stating that this quest to find the 'Demon-Prowler of Mountain Shadows ... Dreaded Man-Beast of Tibet ... The Terror of all that is Human!' was 'too horrible to bring back alive!' – Daring viewers of the movie to watch it alone. In the tradition of adventure movies set in the Himalaya, such as Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* (1939), *The Abominable Snowman* (starring Peter Cushing) plays upon the standard leitmotifs of Tibet as an inaccessible place of spiritual retreat, somewhere concealing a hidden and other-worldly mysticism that hints at deeper truths which have been lost in the industrialised world of modernity. Hence a quest for fame and fortune becomes a search for deeper meanings which have become obscured; exploring a seemingly universal need for escapism. And yet the premise for the story underlying this movie is not so far-fetched as it might seem. In many ways it was based on a genuine tradition of scientific exploration in the Himalaya which had been on-going since the late nineteenth century and was marketed in popular travelogues as well as studies of mysticism and eastern religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism. Well-known contemporary explorers and mountaineers, such as Eric Shipton and Edmund Hillary, themselves went in search of the Yeti. Seen in the context of the contemporary public fascination for the various expeditions leading up to the first successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 (expanding upon a shorter personal blog post/review, see [here](#)), this essay will demonstrate how *The Abominable Snowman* clearly sought to heighten its fantastical elements with a good grounding in an authentic portrayal of such expeditions whilst also playing upon common stereotypes and clichés, thereby transcending two genres which were very much allied, creating a perception of the Himalaya as an oddly opposed place of science and mysticism which persists in Hollywood depictions even today.

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