

= Witchfinder General ( film ) =

Witchfinder General is a 1968 British horror film directed by Michael Reeves and starring Vincent Price , Ian Ogilvy , and Hilary Dwyer . The screenplay was by Reeves and Tom Baker based on Ronald Bassett 's novel of the same name . Made on a low budget of under £ 100 @, @ 000 , the movie was co @-@ produced by Tigon British Film Productions and American International Pictures . The story details the heavily fictionalised murderous witch @-@ hunting exploits of Matthew Hopkins , a 17th @-@ century English lawyer who claimed to have been appointed as a " Witch Finder General " by Parliament during the English Civil War to root out sorcery and witchcraft . The film was retitled The Conqueror Worm in the United States in an attempt to link it with Roger Corman 's earlier series of Edgar Allan Poe ? related films starring Price ? although this movie has nothing to do with any of Poe 's stories , and only briefly alludes to his poem .

Director Reeves featured many scenes of intense onscreen torture and violence that were considered unusually sadistic at the time . Upon its theatrical release throughout the spring and summer of 1968 , the movie 's gruesome content was met with disgust by several film critics in the UK , despite having been extensively censored by the British Board of Film Censors . In the US , the film was shown virtually intact and was a box office success , but it was almost completely ignored by reviewers .

Witchfinder General eventually developed into a cult film , partially attributable to Reeves 's 1969 death from a drug overdose at the age of 25 , only nine months after Witchfinder 's release . Over the years , several prominent critics have championed the film , including J. Hoberman , Danny Peary , and Derek Malcolm . In 2005 , the magazine Total Film named Witchfinder General the 15th greatest horror film of all time .

= = Plot = =

In 1645 , during the English Civil War , Matthew Hopkins ( Vincent Price ) , an opportunist and witchhunter , takes advantage of the breakdown in social order to impose a reign of terror in East Anglia . Hopkins and his assistant , John Stearne ( Robert Russell ) , visit village after village , brutally torturing confessions out of suspected witches . They charge the local magistrates for the work they carry out .

Richard Marshall ( Ian Ogilvy ) is a young Roundhead . After surviving a brief skirmish and killing his first enemy soldier ( and thus saving the life of his Captain ) , he rides home to Brandeston , Suffolk , to visit his lover Sara ( Hilary Dwyer ) . Sara is the niece of the village priest , John Lowes ( Rupert Davies ) . Lowes gives his permission to Marshall to marry Sara , telling him there is trouble coming to the village and he wants Sara far away before it arrives . Marshall asks Sara why the old man is frightened . She tells him they have been threatened and become outcasts in their own village . Marshall vows to Sara , " rest easy and no @-@ one shall harm you . I put my oath to that . " At the end of his army leave , Marshall rides back to join his regiment , and chances upon Hopkins and Stearne on the path . Marshall gives the two men directions to Brandeston then rides on .

In Brandeston , Hopkins and Stearne immediately begin rounding up suspects . Lowes is accused at his home and tortured . He has needles stuck into his back ( in an attempt to locate the so @-@ called " Devil 's Mark " ) , and is about to be killed , when Sara stops Hopkins by offering him sexual favours in exchange for her uncle 's safety . However , soon Hopkins is called away to another village . Stearne takes advantage of Hopkins ' absence by raping Sara . When Hopkins returns and finds out what Stearne has done , Hopkins will have nothing further to do with the young woman . He instructs Stearne to begin torturing Lowes again . Shortly before departing the village , Hopkins and Stearne execute Lowes and two women .

Marshall returns to Brandeston and is horrified by what has happened to Sara . He vows to kill both Hopkins and Stearne . After " marrying " Sara in a ceremony of his own devising and instructing her to flee to Lavenham , he rides off by himself . In the meantime , Hopkins and Stearne have become separated after a Roundhead patrol attempts to commandeer their horses . Marshall locates Stearne , but after a brutal fight , Stearne is able to escape . He reunites with Hopkins and informs

him of Marshall 's desire for revenge .

Hopkins and Stearne enter the village of Lavenham . Marshall , on a patrol to locate the King , learns they are there and quickly rides to the village with a group of his soldier friends . Hopkins , however , having earlier learned that Sara was in Lavenham , has set a trap to capture Marshall . Hopkins and Stearne frame Marshall and Sara as witches and take them to the castle to be interrogated . Marshall watches as needles are repeatedly jabbed into Sara 's back , but he refuses to confess to witchcraft , instead vowing again to kill Hopkins . He breaks free from his bonds and stamps on Stearne 's face , at the same time that his army comrades approach the castle dungeon . Marshall grabs an axe and repeatedly strikes Hopkins . The soldiers enter the room and are horrified to see what their friend has done . One of them puts the mutilated but still living Hopkins out of his misery by shooting him dead . Marshall 's mind snaps and he shouts , " You took him from me ! You took him from me ! " Sara , also apparently on the brink of insanity , screams uncontrollably over and over again .

= = Production = =

Tigon Productions owned the rights to Ronald Bassett 's 1966 novel , Witchfinder General , which was based very loosely on a historical figure named Matthew Hopkins , a self @-@ described " witchhunter " who claimed to have been commissioned by Parliament to prosecute and execute witches . Hopkins was in fact never given an official mandate to hunt witches . Tony Tenser , the founder and chief executive of Tigon , had read Bassett 's book while it was still in galley form and purchased the rights on impulse prior to publication . Despite the novel being " tedious low @-@ brow popular history " , Tenser felt it " had some scope , had some breadth to it ; there was canvas for a film . " Tenser offered the film to Michael Reeves , who had just completed Tigon 's The Sorcerers ( 1967 ) , starring Boris Karloff .

= = = Writing = = =

Reeves provided a story outline which met with Tenser 's enthusiastic approval . Tenser immediately began putting together a preliminary budget , and requested that Reeves quickly complete a full film script , stressing to Reeves that the production would need to commence by September of that year to avoid shooting during cold weather . Reeves called in his childhood friend Tom Baker ( who had co @-@ written The Sorcerers with Reeves ) to assist him with the script . Reeves and Baker began drafting a screenplay with Donald Pleasence firmly in mind as the film 's star . However , once American International Pictures became involved in the production , they insisted that their contract star , Vincent Price , be given the lead , and Pleasence was dropped from the film . With the abrupt change of star , Reeves and Baker had to rethink their original concept of presenting Hopkins as " ineffective and inadequate ... a ridiculous authority figure " , which they had believed Pleasence could play to perfection . They knew the tall , imposing Price , with his long history of horror roles , would have to be more of a straightforward villain , and they made changes to their script accordingly .

As was required by law for British film productions of that time , the completed first draft of the screenplay was presented by Tenser to the British Board of Film Censors ( BBFC ) on 4 August to determine if any possible censorship issues could be anticipated . On the same day , a preliminary report was issued by a BBFC examiner , who , noting that Tenser was an " ape " , referred to the screenplay as " perfectly beastly " and " ghoulish " . The script was returned to Tenser a few days later , with a more detailed report from the same examiner , which described the screenplay as " a study in sadism in which every detail of cruelty and suffering is lovingly dwelt on ... a film which followed the script at all closely would run into endless censorship trouble . " After a second draft was subsequently written and sent to the BBFC only eleven days after the first draft , the reaction was nearly the same . It was returned to Tenser with an " exhaustive list " of requirements to reduce the film 's possible offensiveness .

Reeves and Baker completed a third and final draft that was " substantially toned down " in content

from the previous attempts . This version of the screenplay , which was filmed with only a few minor revisions during the production , was missing many of the more explicit moments of violence described in the first submitted drafts : the death spasms of the pre @-@ credits hanging victim , Lowes getting stabbed fifteen times with a steel spike , and a sniper 's victim somersaulting through the air and slamming into a tree . A sequence depicting the Battle of Naseby was to be filmed , during which a soldier 's head was to be cut off on screen . Most significantly , the film 's finale was completely altered . In the original ending , Stearne falls in with a group of gypsies and attempts to rape one of their women , who successfully fights off her attacker by plunging her thumbs into his eyes , blinding him . The gypsies then stake him to death . Marshall arrives and convinces the gypsies to assist him in ambushing Hopkins . Hopkins is viciously beaten by Marshall , who forces a " confession " out of the bloodied man . Marshall partially drowns Hopkins ( whose thumbs have been tied to his feet ) , then finally hangs him . Tenser had previously expressed concerns regarding the scope of the Battle of Naseby sequence as well as the gypsy @-@ ending , noting that these would both require the employment of additional groups of extras . He asked Reeves and Baker to remove the battle sequence and simplify the ending for the final draft .

#### = = = Cast = = =

Vincent Price as Matthew Hopkins . Decidedly not Michael Reeves 's choice for the part , this was the veteran horror star 's 75th film and his 17th for American International Pictures . Some of the performances he provided for his previous AIP movies had certain elements of campy overacting , but in *Witchfinder* he was subtle and deadly serious . The role was a great challenge for Price , as his frequent clashes with Reeves left him unsure as to what the director wanted ( see " Filming " section below ) . Despite this , Price ultimately felt he delivered " one of the best performances I 've ever given . "

Ian Ogilvy as Richard Marshall . Ogilvy had been a friend of Reeves since they were teenagers , and the actor had appeared in many of the director 's amateur short films . Ogilvy had also starred in both of Reeves 's two previous feature films , *Revenge of the Blood Beast* and *The Sorcerers* , and was the natural first choice for the role of *Witchfinder* 's heroic lead . Describing his working relationship with Reeves , Ogilvy noted that " his mastery of the technical aspects was absolute " , but added " Mike never directed the actors . He always said he knew nothing about acting , and preferred to leave it up to us . " Ogilvy enjoyed working with Price , finding him to be " very funny , in a ' queeny ' sort of way . "

Hilary Dwyer as Sara . *Witchfinder* was Dwyer 's debut feature film . With three years of television work behind her , she had been noticed by Tenser and put under contract with Tigon . She felt Reeves was " just wonderful ... He was really inspiring to work with . And because it was my first film I didn 't know how lucky I was . " At 21 , she found appearing in the love and rape scenes " stressful " . She would go on to make several more horror movies for AIP , most of them co @-@ starring Price , before retiring from acting in the late 1970s .

Rupert Davies as John Lowes . Appearing as Dwyer 's uncle , *Witchfinder* was only one of several horror films the British character actor found himself in during the later stage of his career . Davies was not pleased when he discovered that the filming of his torture scenes was to be augmented with actual live rats placed on his body . The actor recalled Reeves instructing him , " Don 't move , Rupert ! Don 't move ! Wait until one of them starts nibbling your jaw then you might move your head a little . "

Robert Russell as John Stearne . Playing Hopkins 's thuggish assistant , Russell certainly looked the part . However , as filming progressed , Reeves found the actor 's high pitched voice unsuitable for such a rough character , and after production was completed he had all of his dialogue dubbed by another actor , Jack Lynn ( who also appeared in a small role as an innkeeper ) .

Patrick Wymark as Oliver Cromwell . Wymark received prominent billing for a " one @-@ day bit part " .

Other cast : Nicky Henson as Trooper Swallow , Wilfrid Brambell as Master Loach , Tony Selby as Salter , Bernard Kay as Fisherman , Godfrey James as Webb , Michael Beint as Captain Gordon ,

John Treneman as Harcourt , Bill Maxwell as Gifford , " Morris Jar " ( pseudonym for Paul Ferris ) as Paul , Maggie Kimberly as Elizabeth , Peter Haigh as Lavenham Magistrate , Hira Talfrey as Hanged Woman , Anne Tirard as Old Woman , Peter Thomas as Farrier , Edward Palmer as Shepherd , David Webb as Jailer , Lee Peters as Sergeant , David Lyell as Footsoldier , Alf Joint as Sentry , Martin Terry as Hoxne Innkeeper , Jack Lynn as Brandeston Innkeeper , Beaufoy Milton as Priest , Dennis Thorne as Villager , Michael Segal as Villager , Toby Lennon as Old Man , Margaret Nolan as Girl at Inn , Sally Douglas as Girl at Inn , Donna Reading as Girl at Inn , Derek Ware as Boy at Hoxne Inn .

= = = Filming = = =

Production began on 18 September 1967 with a budget of £ 83 @, @ 000 . £ 32 @, @ 000 was provided by AIP , with £ 12 @, @ 000 for Price 's expenditures and fees , and £ 20 @, @ 000 for production costs . Philip Waddilove , a former BBC radio and record producer , contributed £ 5 @, @ 000 in return for associate producer billing . Although the film would be the biggest budgeted title in Tigon 's history , for AIP their part of the budget represented a relatively small expenditure of money . Not much in terms of real quality was expected by AIP heads Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson , and the movie was intended to be nothing more than a tax write @-@ off .

The interiors were filmed in two specially converted aircraft hangars near Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk , which were leased for £ 1 @, @ 500 ; this cost @-@ measure resulted in much of the dialogue having to be re @-@ recorded later , because the tin roofs of the hangars caused an echo . The exterior shots range from the Dunwich Coast ( for the scene with the fisherman ) to Langley Park outside London ( for the scene where Stearne escapes capture ) . The tracking shot of the ambush after the opening credits was filmed at Black Park in southeast Buckinghamshire , a location frequently used by Hammer Film Productions . Lavenham Square ( in Lavenham , Suffolk ) , site of the witch @-@ burning scene , was the real Lavenham Market Square ; the crew lowered TV antennas and telephone wires and Waddilove hired a cherry picker from a local utility company for £ 10 , because the unit couldn 't afford a camera crane . The countryside vistas seen in the chase scenes on horseback were shot on the Stanford Battle Area near Thetford , Norfolk ? the producer , through connections with the government , was able to lease parts of the area . The church used in the film is St John The Evangelist in Rushford in Norfolk . The moat drowning and hanging scenes were filmed at Kentwell Hall , in Long Melford . The climax of the film was shot at Orford Castle , on the coast of East Anglia , which is an English Heritage property . Filming wrapped as scheduled on 13 November 1967 .

The production went relatively smoothly except for the unrelentingly antagonistic relationship that developed between Reeves and Price . Reeves kept it no secret from everyone associated with the production that the American actor was not his choice for the role , and the director 's comments had reached the actor back in the US . Reeves refused the courtesy of meeting Price at London Heathrow Airport when he arrived in England , a " deliberate snub calculated to offend both Price and AIP . " " Take me to your goddamn young genius , " Price reportedly said to co @-@ producer Philip Waddilove , who greeted the actor at the airport instead of Reeves . When Price went on location and met Reeves for the first time , the young director told the actor , " I didn 't want you , and I still don 't want you , but I 'm stuck with you ! "

According to Kim Newman in his book , Nightmare Movies , when Reeves made a suggestion on the set , Price objected and told the director : " I 've made 87 [ sic ] films . What have you done ? " And Reeves responded : " I 've made three good ones . " " Reeves hated me , " Price later recalled . " He didn 't want me at all for the part . I didn 't like him , either . It was one of the first times in my life that I 've been in a picture where the director and I just clashed . " Price felt that all the actors on the set had a difficult time with the director , explaining : " Michael Reeves could not communicate with actors . He would stop me and say , ' Don 't move your head like that . ' And I would say , ' Like what ? What do you mean ? ' He 'd say , ' There ? you 're doing it again . Don 't do that ' . " Price reportedly became so upset with Reeves that he refused to watch the film 's dailies .

In one scene , Reeves needed Price to shoot his flintlock between the ears of the horse he was

riding . When Price realised that Reeves had ordered that an actual blank charge was to be used so the weapon 's puff of smoke would be visible , he immediately shouted , " What ? You want the gun to go bang between the ears of this fucking nag ? How do you think he 's going to react ? " However , Reeves insisted and , when the gun went off , the horse reared and sent Price tumbling onto the ground . Price was not hurt but he was extremely angered by the incident .

On the final day of shooting , Price showed up on the set visibly intoxicated . Reeves seethed to Waddilove , " He 's drunk ? how dare he be drunk on my set ! I 'll kill the bastard . " Waddilove soon discovered that Reeves planned to inflict painful revenge on the actor . During preparations for Price 's violent death scene , the director was overheard instructing Ogilvy to " really lay into Vincent " with the stage axe . Although when the scene was filmed Ogilvy indeed responded with blows that were not faked , Waddilove had earlier found some foam padding and fitted Price 's costume with it , protecting the actor from any injury .

Despite the tension between the two men during the production , when Price saw the movie the following year , he admitted that he finally understood what Reeves had been after and wrote the young director a ten @-@ page letter praising the film . Reeves wrote Price back , " I knew you would think so . " Years after Reeves 's death , Price said , " ... I realized what he wanted was a low @-@ key , very laid @-@ back , menacing performance . He did get it , but I was fighting him almost every step of the way . Had I known what he wanted , I would have cooperated . "

In addition to his difficult relationship with Price , Reeves had to deal with a few production problems during the shooting . On the first day , Price was thrown from his horse and sent back to his hotel to recover . The actor returned to work the following day . Towards the end of filming , a strike was called when the British technicians union learned the production company was not hiring a large enough crew as required by union rules . After an extra man was hired , the crew resumed working . On two occasions , Reeves was short of actors . Waddilove replaced an absent actor as a Roundhead officer during Wymark 's one @-@ day scene . Waddilove 's wife , Susi , played one of the women in the animal enclosure during the witch @-@ burning sequence .

The film 's violent climax was edited together in its present shape due to a continuity problem . In the screenplay , the soldier played by Nicky Henson was supposed to shoot both Price and Ogilvy to death . However , the actor only had one flintlock pistol , which had been clearly established in previous scenes , and was therefore only able to shoot one person . When the error was discovered , Reeves immediately told the actor : " All right , just shoot Vincent and I 'll get Ian to scream and shout and go mad and freeze frame on Hilary Dwyer screaming . "

Several " alternate " nude scenes were filmed during the production . Set in a pub and involving local " wenches " , the sequences were reportedly solely intended for the movie 's German release version . Reeves refused to take part in the filming of these sequences and they were completed by the crew after the " regular " versions of the scenes had been shot , with Tigon 's Tenser acting as director . According to Waddilove , Louis M. " Deke " Heywood appeared at the location only to ensure those additional scenes were filmed . The credits read , " Additional scenes by Louis M Heywood . " According to Ogilvy , this was an in @-@ joke because for Reeves , " additional scenes " meant " some prick of a producer putting his oar in and messing up what the director had done . " None of these scenes were made available in the theatrical versions released in the US or UK , although they were included in the videotape version released in the mid @-@ 1980s by HBO Home Video .

= = = Censorship = = =

For its time , Witchfinder General was considered an unusually sadistic film experience . British film censor John Trevelyan was reportedly a distant cousin of Michael Reeves and accepted the director 's good intentions when Reeves explained why he felt it was necessary to include such intense violence in the movie . Trevelyan nonetheless argued , " The film gave the impression that it was exploiting violence , and in particular , sadism for commercial reasons . " Consequently , the film was cut extensively by the British Board of Film Censors for its UK release . Nearly two complete minutes of what was described as " excesses of sadistic brutality " were removed . Reeves agreed

to make some of the initial minor cuts himself , but when additional and more extensive demands were made he adamantly refused to take part in any further editing .

Trevelyan claimed that Reeves later wrote him a letter admitting that the cuts were not as harmful as he had expected . No copy of the letter has ever surfaced , and based on several other comments the director subsequently made about how the edits " ruined the film " , Reeves 's biographer Benjamin Halligan believes Trevelyan may have somehow " misremembered " the existence of this letter , confusing it with an earlier missive from the director in which he made a plea for the BBFC 's leniency .

= = Reception = =

Even the truncated version was met with considerable controversy by UK film critics . Dilys Powell in The Sunday Times complained " ... 17th century hanging , burning , raping , screaming , and Vincent Price as England 's prize torture @-@ overseer . Peculiarly nauseating . " The Guardian felt the film was filled with " gratuitous sadism . " Margaret Hinxman of The Sunday Telegraph dismissed it as a " sadistic extravaganza . " Nonetheless , several critics felt the film was worth accolades . John Russell Taylor in the London Times Saturday Review said the film " ... is quite happily and deliberately a horror film : that is to say , it has no particular pretensions to being anything else ... There is much in it which would win Michael Reeves an important reputation if he were dealing with some more pretentious , but fundamentally no more serious subject ... Mr. Reeves is no longer merely promising . He already has real achievements behind him : not merely good horror films , but good films , period . " Films and Filming noted , " Witchfinder General has no explicit ' message ' , but it does say something about the springs of despair and it says it forcefully . It is a very frightening film ... Matthew Hopkins is the best of Price 's recent performances . Witchfinder General is emphatically not a horror film ; it is , however , a very horrifying one ... " Monthly Film Bulletin observed , " Not since Peeping Tom has a film aroused such an outcry about nastiness and gratuitous violence as this one ... the tone of the film is oddly muted , with torture and death in plenty , but viewed matter @-@ of @-@ factly and without stress ... Throughout the whole film there is a vivid sense of a time out of joint , which comes as much from the stray groups of soldiers who skirmish against unseen attackers in the woods or hang wearily about by the wayside waiting for battle to commence , as from the bloody crimes committed in the name of religion by Matthew Hopkins . "

Playwright Alan Bennett was particularly repulsed by Witchfinder . In his regular column in The Listener , published eight days after the film 's release , Bennett explained how he felt horror films should always be " punctuated by belly laughs " and attacked Reeves 's completely humourless movie as " the most persistently sadistic and morally rotten film I have seen . It was a degrading experience by which I mean it made me feel dirty . " Although Reeves was infuriated , his response indicated that he believed Bennett 's reaction was proof that his decision to include such extreme violence was the correct approach to the material . In his letter published in The Listener , Reeves noted : " Surely the most immoral thing in any form of entertainment is the conditioning of the audience to accept and enjoy violence ... Violence is horrible , degrading and sordid . Insofar as one is going to show it on the screen at all , it should be presented as such ? and the more people it shocks into sickened recognition of these facts the better . I wish I could have witnessed Mr. Bennett frantically attempting to wash away the ' dirty ' feeling my film gave him . It would have been proof of the fact that Witchfinder General works as intended . "

AIP heads Arkoff and Nicholson had originally contributed their portion of the budget as a tax write @-@ off , but when they were screened the completed film they were astonished by its quality . Nicholson told Louis Heyward , " It is one of the best we have gotten from England . Everybody thinks this is about the best production in the Poe series for the past few years . " Arkoff noted that " Michael Reeves brought out some elements in Vincent that hadn 't been seen in a long time . Vincent was more savage in the picture . Michael really brought out the balls in him . I was surprised how terrifying Vincent was in that ... I hadn 't expected it . "

In the US , the film was not subject to any censorship at all , and was released virtually intact to AIP

's usual mix of drive @-@ ins and grindhouses . However , in an attempt to link the film with Roger Corman 's earlier Edgar Allan Poe series of films , it was retitled *The Conqueror Worm* . Brief prologue and epilogue narrations ( by Price ) taken from Poe 's poem were added to justify the new title . As Danny Peary noted in his *Cult Movies* book , the film went nearly unnoticed by critics during its US release : " The few snoozing trade reviewers who saw it treated it as just another entry in AIP 's Edgar Allan Poe series ... and gave it such dismal notices that future bookings were scarce . " *Hollywood Citizen News* was appalled by the film : " A disgrace to the producers and scripters , and a sad commentary on the art of filmmaking ... a film with such bestial brutality and orgiastic sadism , one wonders how it ever passed customs to be released in this country . " The trade journal *Box Office* noted that : " Fans of the horror film will be glad to know that Vincent Price is back to add another portrait to his gallery of arch @-@ fiends ... bathed in the most stomach @-@ churning gore imaginable ... " *Variety* opined that " Dwyer gives evidence of acting talent , but she and all principals are hampered by Michael Reeves 's mediocre script and ordinary direction . " Despite the lack of critical support , the movie was a modest success stateside , earning \$ 1 @. @ 5 million for AIP according to *Cinefantastique* magazine . In his biography of Reeves , Benjamin Halligan claims the film made \$ 10 million in the US .

The film 's retitling by AIP caused a minor fracas in Hong Kong . A group of British sailors had seen the movie at the base cinema under its original title and one week later unwittingly saw the movie again in a local cinema , playing under the American release title . They immediately demanded their money back and , when the manager refused , they tipped over litter bins , threw popcorn at the screen , and " almost tore the theatre apart . " The manager changed his mind and paid the sailors back for the price of the tickets , and sent a bill to AIP for the damages .

Very soon after its initial release in the spring of 1968 , several critics began championing the film in the UK and US . David Pirie , who wrote extensively and enthusiastically about the film in his 1973 book *A Heritage of Horror* , reviewed the film in 1971 for *Time Out* , commenting : " ... one of the most personal and mature statements in the history of British cinema ... The performances are generally excellent , and no film before or since has used the British countryside in quite the same way . " Danny Peary noted , " *The Conqueror Worm* is a stunning film in many ways , but probably Reeves 's greatest achievement is that he was able to maintain an extraordinary momentum throughout , until the film ends as it began , with a woman ( this time Sara ) screaming . " In 2000 , Derek Malcolm included *Witchfinder General* as part of his series *The Century of Films* , a list of what he considered to be the one hundred most " artistically or culturally important " movies of the 20th Century . Malcolm asserted that the film " is one of the most compulsively watchable ever made in Britain " and " transcends its genre with the sheer panache of its making . " In 2005 , J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* stated that the film " ... has long been a cult item ? in part because its talented 25 @-@ year @-@ old director , Michael Reeves , died of a drug overdose before [ sic ] the film 's release , but mainly because it is an extraordinarily bleak story of political evil ... Reeves shot on location and the movie has a robust autumnal quality perfectly matched by Price 's overripe performance ... it remains contemporary , and even frightening , in its evocation of cynical Puritanism and mass deception . "

In his 2007 book , *Madness Unchained : A Reading of Virgil 's ' Aeneid '* , Lee Fratantuono described *Witchfinder General* as a modern retelling of the main themes of Virgil 's epic *Aeneid* , and its central image of the unrelenting nature of fury and madness and its power to corrupt essentially good heroes . Fratantuono has written that in the film Reeves " has captured exactly the point of Virgil 's great epic of madness and its horrifying conclusion . "

= = Influence = =

Writer Mark Thomas McGee noted that *Witchfinder General* " did fantastic business and kicked off a second wave of Edgar Allan Poe movies " produced by American International Pictures , including Gordon Hessler 's *The Oblong Box* starring Price ( originally scheduled to be directed by Reeves but handed over to Hessler after Reeves bowed out a week prior to production ) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* ( 1971 ) . Hessler 's *Cry of the Banshee* ( 1970 ) , which featured *Witchfinder* co @-@ stars

Price and Hilary Dwyer , was also vaguely associated with Poe in advertisements ( " Edgar Allan Poe Probes New Depths of Terror ! " ) ; it was dismissed by Allmovie as " a rehashing of Witchfinder General . " This new Poe " series " was short @-@ lived and effectively over by 1971 .

According to AIP 's Louis Heyward , Witchfinder General " was very successful in Germany ? it was the most successful of the violence pictures ? it started a vogue . " " Copycat " films financed , or partially financed , by German production companies included Mark of the Devil ( 1970 ) , with Herbert Lom and Udo Kier , The Bloody Judge ( 1970 ) , directed by Jesus Franco and starring Christopher Lee , and Hexen geschändet und zu Tode gequält ( 1973 ) , released in the U.S. years later on video as Mark of the Devil Part II .

Tigon 's own The Blood on Satan 's Claw ( 1970 ) was produced " as a successor , in spirit if not in story " to Witchfinder General , and borrowed Reeves 's usage of " the usually tranquil English countryside as a place of terror . " Mark Gatiss has referred to the film as a prime example of a short @-@ lived subgenre he called " folk horror " , grouping it with Satan 's Claw and The Wicker Man .

Some critics maintain that Ken Russell 's The Devils ( 1971 ) was influenced by the commercial success of Reeves 's film , with one writer calling Russell 's movie " the apex of the ' historical ' witch @-@ persecution films started by Witchfinder General . " However , Russell has noted that he hated Reeves 's film , describing it as " one of the worst movies I have ever seen and certainly the most nauseous . "

The film has had a minor influence on heavy metal music . In 1980 , the movie inspired a band to call themselves Witchfinder General . The group broke up in 1983 . Another metal band , Cathedral , released a 1996 EP titled Hopkins ( The Witchfinder General ) , featuring a song of the same name . That song also appeared on their album , The Carnival Bizarre and the music video was included as an extra on the UK DVD release of Reeves 's film . And Electric Wizard have a song from their 2000 album Dopethrone called " I , The Witchfinder " , although its lyrics indicate it may also have been inspired by Mark of the Devil . American death doom band Acid Witch recorded a song inspired by the film , titled " Witchfynder Finder " , which was featured on their second LP , 2010 's Stoned .

The film was the inspiration for a BBC Radio 4 play Vincent Price and The Horror of The English Blood Beast by Matthew Broughton , first broadcast in March 2010 .

= = Historical accuracy = =

While some reviewers have praised the film for its ostensible " historical accuracy " , others have strongly questioned its adherence to historical fact . Dr. Malcolm Gaskill , Fellow and former Director of Studies in history at Churchill College , Cambridge , and author of Witchfinders : A 17th @-@ Century English Tragedy , critiqued the film for the Channel 4 History website , calling it " a travesty of historical truth " while acknowledging that " there is much to be said in favour of Witchfinder General ? but as a film , not as history . " Based purely on its level of historical accuracy , Gaskill gave the film " 3 stars " on a scale of 0 ? 10 .

Gaskill had several complaints regarding the film 's " distortions and flights of fancy " . While Hopkins and his assistant John Stearne really did torture , try and hang John Lowes , the vicar of Brandeston , Gaskill notes that other than those basic facts the film 's narrative is " almost completely fictitious . " In the movie , the fictional character of Richard Marshall pursues Hopkins relentlessly to death , but in reality the " gentry , magistrates and clergy , who undermined his work in print and at law " were in pursuit of Hopkins throughout his ( brief ) murderous career , as he was never legally sanctioned to perform his witch @-@ hunting duties . And Hopkins wasn 't axed to death , he " withered away from consumption at his Essex home in 1647 " . Vincent Price was 56 when he played Hopkins , but " the real Hopkins was in his 20s " . According to Gaskill , one of the film 's " most striking errors is its total omission of court cases : witches are simply tortured , then hanged from the nearest tree . "

= = Home video versions = =

Censorship and musical rights issues kept a complete , pristine version of Witchfinder General from



being released on videotape , laserdisc or DVD for many years . Although uncensored theatrical prints have been available for archival showings in the US for several years , video releases of the title were repeatedly compromised .

The " Export Version " , which contained both the previously cut violence and alternate shots of topless nudity filmed for overseas release , was passed uncut by the BBFC in 1995 , and released on VHS by Redemption . In 2001 , a DVD was released in the UK by Metrodome consisting of two versions , the complete " Director 's Cut " containing the two minutes of previously censored violence , and the aforementioned " Export Version " , also with the violence intact but including shots of nudity added to certain sequences . In both versions , the two minutes of violence have been taken from what has been described as " a grainy VHS source . " Some critics complained that watching the film in this manner was an often " jarring " or " distracting " viewing experience . In addition , the soundtrack of the newly inserted nude shots had " brief snippets of audio repeating itself because of the timing involved in inserting the previously cut footage " .

In the US , while censorship of the film has never been a factor , the film nonetheless experienced numerous delays in appearing on home video in its originally intended form . When Orion Pictures acquired the rights to many of AIP 's titles in the 1980s , they were unable to also purchase rights to the musical soundtracks of some of the films , and added synthesizer scores by composer Kendall Schmidt in lieu of the original music . Witchfinder General was one of these " problem " titles . For years , Paul Ferris 's acclaimed full orchestral score was not available in the US on home video releases , although it was included on theatrical and syndicated television prints . The HBO videotape release from the late 1980s utilised the Orion version , which also included the nude inserts . Tim Lucas noted that the spoken soundtrack to these newly added " spicy " shots " doesn 't match it correctly . "

In 2005 , writer Steve Biodrowski reported that a " definitive version " of the film had been restored and would be released in the US on DVD by MGM @-@ UA in August of that year , as part of their Midnite Movies series . After Sony purchased the rights to the MGM film library , James Owsley ( Director of Restorations at MGM ) advised Philip Waddilove ( one of Witchfinder General 's producers ) that the date of the DVD release was postponed until October 2006 . In an interview conducted in August 2005 , Waddilove revealed that he had learned Sony had " little interest " in the film and no official announcement of any pending DVD release had ever been made . Waddilove noted that " the principal at Sony doesn 't greenlight DVDs of anything older than ten years ! ! " However , the film was indeed released under the Midnite Movies banner on 11 September 2007 by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment . The release includes the complete , uncut version of the film with the Ferris score intact . Price 's opening and closing narration tacked on to the AIP Conqueror Worm version , as well as the alternate nude sequences , were not available on this release , but they were included in the UK Blu @-@ ray release from Odeon Entertainment issued in June 2011 . The Blu @-@ ray utilised the same high @-@ definition transfer as the 2007 MGM DVD and was completely uncut . In 2013 , Scream Factory included the film as part of the company 's multi @-@ title Vincent Price Blu @-@ ray box set released in Fall of 2013 .