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Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema

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Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema

Abstract

This is a book review of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen, eds., *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

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Author Notes

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Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew and Regina M. Hansen, eds., *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

Since the films of pioneer Georges Méliès, Satan has been a pervasive presence in cinema. The thirteen (!) essays comprising this volume attempt to cover this entire history, beginning with the Devil in silent film and continuing to the apocalyptic films of the twenty-first century. While obviously not intended to be comprehensive, the volume still gives readers a strong overview of the many embodiments of Satan through the decades, with some well-placed insights into the cultural anxieties that these devilish appearances might point towards.

In the introductory essay, the editors frame the volume with the lens of Maltby's "new cinema history," expressing the volume's goal of exploring "broader considerations of the relationship between film and culture as filtered through religion and fantasy" (3). The authors make a brief mention of how the "current, anthropomorphized depiction of Satan developed over time" (3), along with a very brief tour of Satan in the Bible and Christian theology, but scholars of religion might wish for a more robust treatment of this idea. However, the authors do an excellent job of establishing the volume's overall goals in bringing together these many instances of Satan as a filmic character. They suggest that "any consideration of the cinematic devil as simply avatar of evil to be rejected is far too reductive" (9). Instead, Satan is often used to foreground "the kinds of violence and exclusion to which women are subject in orthodox religious belief systems and Western culture more generally" (9), along with being used to "highlight God's absence" (10). More than being an embodiment of evil, the figure of Satan has frequently allowed filmmakers to explore ideas of evil that exist within the world due to the malevolence or failures of humanity.

From this introduction, the chapters proceed (roughly) chronologically. Beginning with Russ Hunter's chapter "The Sign of the Cross: George Méliès and Early Satanic Cinema." Hunter

notes that many of Méliès's films employ imagery of the Devil and other macabre themes. While being careful not to suggest that Méliès "invented" the horror genre, Hunter argues that Méliès and other filmmakers of this period "were integral in both facilitating and providing visual reference points for the bit-by-bit development of the horror as a fully-fledged cinematic genre" (16). This argument is quite similar to Kendall Phillips' recent monograph *A Place of Darkness: The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), though Hunter expands the argument to include European cinema. Barry C. Knowlton and Eloise R. Knowlton move forward several decades to explore "Murnau's *Faust* and the Weimar Moment." The authors read the film of "a good man saved by divine forgiveness" as assuaging "postwar guilt by depicting, for a Germany suffering international condemnation, forgiveness and salvation" (27). The authors begin with an overview of Satan in Christian theology and the book of Job, which is far too brief and lacking in secondary sources to do justice to the complex subject. Furthermore, the authors display a stereotyped reading of the Old Testament when they argue that the film is "structured like the Bible, in two distinct parts." They see the first part as being "something of an 'Old Testament,' caught up in questions of legality and law, ritual and ceremony, covenants between Man and the Supernatural" (35). While the close attention to the German context of Murnau's *Faust* provides an interesting thesis, the essay would be improved by a more nuanced handling of the religious questions underlying the film. J. P. Telotte's chapter, "Disney's Devils," unpacks the frequently disturbing imagery of the Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony cartoons from the 1920s-1940s. In Disney's depictions of devils, Telotte finds the "range of possibilities" that existed in Disney films, and early animation in general, which found the films "oscillat[ing] between subversive and conservative principles," even within the same film (55).

While the book is not divided into sections, the next chapter marks a sharp break, as the book's remaining chapters will all discuss mainstream Hollywood feature films. Katherine A. Fowkes examines four comedies that center on the Devil, each from a different decade. The chapter focuses on *Bedazzled* (1967) and its 2000 remake, *Oh, God! You Devil!* (1984), and *Damn Yankees* (1958). In three of the four films, Fowkes reads the devil as being in league with "the scourges of modern-day life," but all of them share in common the theme that rejecting the devil means being "true to oneself" (58). In this way, all of these films "throw the ball back to ordinary humans," by focusing on "the choices they make" (69). The next several chapters discuss films that are conventionally categorized as horror, beginning with David Sterritt's chapter "His Father's Eyes: *Rosemary's Baby*." The chapter covers the basics of the film's plot, production, and reception, before turning to the film's "metaphysics" (79-82), arguing that Rosemary's final choice to "reject her (extremely) illegitimate child" makes her an "honorary member of the coven," transforming the film into a story "which has no heroine and no hero" (82). However, the essay doesn't really develop a thesis about the film's particular use of Satan. More successful in this vein is R. Barton Palmer's chapter "From the Eternal Sea He Rises, Creating Armies on Either Shore: The Christology of the *Omen* Franchise," which places the films in the context of 1970s evangelical millenarian theology. But in contrast to these triumphalist visions of apocalyptic conflict, Palmer notes that in the *Omen* films "the church is a seldom-glimpsed presence that possesses no powers to deliver humanity," and "God is essentially a no-show" (94-95). Instead, the films focus on "small-scale and all-too-human melodrama" (95) making a marked contrast with both Revelation and the more recent *Left Behind* series (101).

Carl H. Sederholm reads Satan as a cosmic force in "The Weird Devil: Lovecraftian Horror in John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*." In this film, Satan is embodied as a "swirling mass of

green liquid,” which serves as the backdrop for “reflections on the nature of God and of Satan [that] ultimately suggest material realities that defy all human understanding” (105), as both religion and science are shown to be inadequate systems for explaining the cosmos. Murray Leeder’s chapter “Narration and Damnation in *Angel Heart*” views the devil in this intriguing horror-noir film as the “diegetic incarnation of the implied author...who works tricks not only of light and shadow but of narrative manipulation” (120), particularly as the film’s conclusion twists the conventions of the detective narrative by revealing that “the criminal and the detective are one and the same” (131). Co-editor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock contributes “The Devil’s in the Details: Devilish Desire and Roman Polanski’s *The Ninth Gate*,” a film which Weinstock reads as being “less about the devil himself than about modern desire for him” (136). Through the overlapping pursuits of knowledge that film depicts, the characters are all seeking “the existence of the transcendent,” which the film portrays as necessarily diabolical (147).

Simon Bacon brings together an unlikely pairing of films in his chapter “Agency or Allowance: The Satanic Complications of Female Autonomy in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Witch*.” While one is a comedic film set in contemporary times and the other a pitch-black piece of period folk-horror, Bacon finds them both to imply that “any feminine liberation gained or granted under the auspices of an excessively masculine, if often transgressive, figure such as Satan is still preferable to life under the oppressive regime of patriarchy” (149-150). Catherine O’Brien’s chapter “‘Roaming the Earth’: Satan in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ*” brings together two films that are both rooted in the Gospel narratives, but present a very different portrait of Satan (and Christ). O’Brien argues that both directors “succeed in bringing Satan back to the forefront of the action” (162), though with two very different dramatic arcs: while Christ’s victory is always assured in Gibson’s film, Scorsese’s presents a doubt-wracked

Christ who is in constant danger of succumbing to the temptations of Satan. The last two essays both discuss Satan in Parousia-themed horror films, beginning with co-editor Regina Hansen's "Lucifer, Gabriel, and the Angelic Will in *The Prophecy* and *Constantine*." Hansen argues for the ambiguity of the angelic characters in these films, as the supposedly "good angels behave monstrously" in their mission to carry out God's will (178). In contrast, the films' human characters are allowed the free will to choose "moral goodness," as opposed to the "religious orthodoxy or supernatural intervention" which leads to evil (188). David Hauka's essay "Advocating for Satan: The Parousia-Inspired Horror Genre" concludes the volume, in which the author argues for a consistent thread in apocalyptic supernatural horror films which presents "control over women's bodies and reproductive systems as Satan's objective" (191). In a frequent storyline, female characters are reduced to "'vessels' for Satan's child...until a man sacrifices himself for her" (203).

The chapters comprising this volume have much to commend them. A number of the chapters make interesting connections between films (Bacon, O'Brien), or use the figure of Satan as a connecting thread to provide fascinating readings of connected cycles or genres (Hunter, Telotte, Hauka). The volume's primary focus is on readings that emerge from a film or cultural studies perspective, which sometimes leads to a lack of depth in the discussion of the religious elements of these films. There are only a handful of essays, including those by O'Brien and Hansen, that successfully address the figure of Satan in the films under discussion from either a biblical or theological perspective; in places, readers might wish for more depth in this regard. Overall, this volume provides an excellent overview of an important cinematic character who has proven flexible enough to adapt to a wide range of contexts, themes, and perspectives. This volume is an important step towards understanding why the devil always gets the best lines.