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223 Wick

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223 Wick

Abstract

This is a film review of *223 Wick* (2022), directed by Sergio Myers.

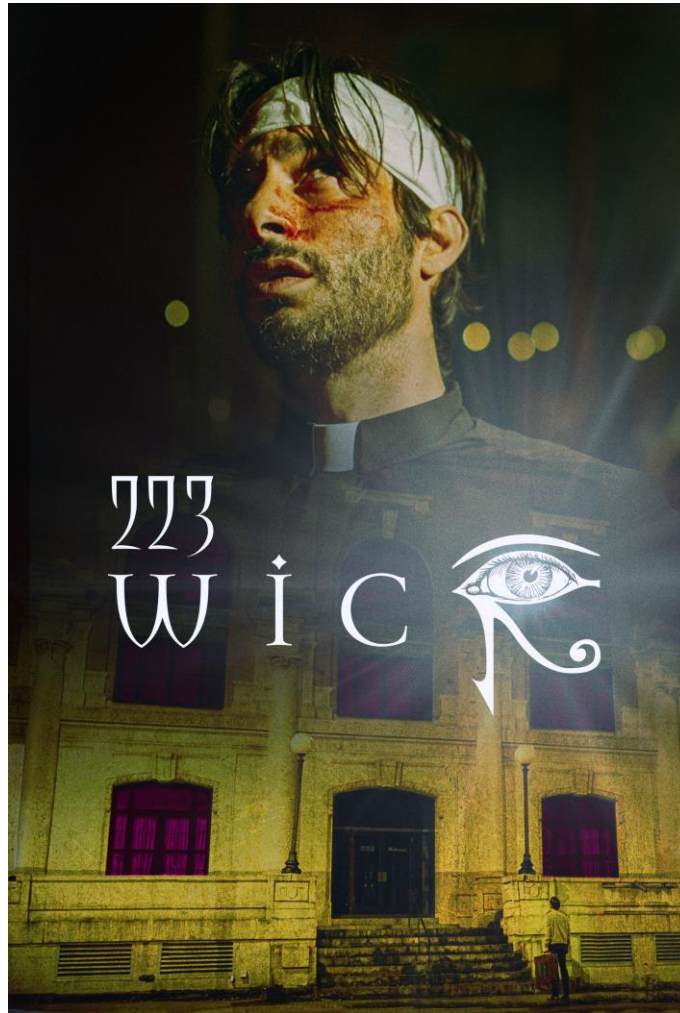
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Author Notes

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223 Wick (2022), dir. Sergio Myers

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6PE_hihjs8

Just as TIFF 2022 was drawing to a close, I opened my email to find an invitation I couldn't refuse: an offer of a screener-link for the digital-only movie *223 Wick*, a "supernatural religious thriller" that "will not be rated by the MPAA." Did this film have anything to do with TIFF, or did its publicity team just get ahold of the TIFF listserv? More importantly, what scandal awaited my eyeballs? The email contained hints: a Catholic priest plagued by nightmares and "sinister visions." A director, Sergio Myers, who is a "reality TV veteran and documentary filmmaker"

known for such titles as *MTV's Sorority Life*, *Heaven's Gate: The Untold Story*, and *Becoming Pony Boi*.

To watch *223 Wick* is to wonder whether it could end up on midnight movie docket across North America. If it did, midnight moviegoers might get sleepy. The pacing is a bit too slow for a schlocky late-night thrill ride. Although *223 Wick* is a horror movie, it often feels closer in tone to a film like Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (so transcendently bad that its cult following inspired hipster-auteur James Franco to direct and star in a film about its making, *The Disaster Artist*). As in *The Room*, the actors in *223 Wick* often seem kind of surprised to be delivering lines onscreen. Action sags. The protagonist repeatedly asks himself versions of the question, "Wait, where am I? What am I doing here?" The viewer might find himself posing parallel queries.

The story, in brief, with full spoilers: Father John (Alexi Stavrou), a young priest and passionate teacher at a parish school, suffers from headaches and insomnia to such an extent that he is put on administrative leave. Instead of going to the religious retreat that has been prepared for him, he instead tells his taxi driver to take him to an address that has appeared in his nightmare visions: *223 Wick*. Upon arriving at the darkened building, John immediately faints (and spends the rest of the movie with a bloody bandage on his forehead). A rough-looking man named Paul (Greg Pierot) emerges from the shadows to tend to the wounded priest and show him to his new room. Father John then spends what seems like several days exploring the building, as his headaches become progressively worse. *223 Wick*, we learn, used to be a Masonic lodge. It was recently acquired by the new "madame," Katarina (Dawn Lafferty), a secret devotee of the ancient Egyptian god Horus. Somehow, our priest's psychic powers are the key to bringing Horus back to earth. There are other plot twists along the way: Katarina occasionally devours the flesh of her still-living sister; nefarious priests plot nefariously; a young priest (played by Sergio Myers II,

presumably the director's son) tries to save Father John but is captured by our cryptic occultists and placed at the center of an evil rite.

All of this would seem like a rollicking good time—if it had anything like normal pacing. But fear not! As film scholar Jeffrey Sconce has argued, the best way to learn about how movies work, both formally and ideologically, is to watch bad movies (what he calls “paracinema”). Good movies conceal the apparatus beneath the hood of the car, allowing you to lose yourself in the ride. Bad movies open their insides to glorious display, with sputtering mechanics demanding attention.

Bad movies also offer up distinctive aesthetic pleasures, and *223 Wick* is, in its way, full of them— a kitschy carousel of genre disorientation. Why the implicit reference to the film *John Wick*? Why does the menacing Father Murphy (Jack Dimich) have an Italian or possibly Eastern European accent? How can you achieve his excellent Kris Kristofferson hair?



Why does Father Murphy's even creepier superior, sent by the diocese to manage the Father John situation, seem like a recent escapee from Guns N' Roses, his lengthy tresses (longer even than his fingernails) looking like they've been chemically straightened and ironed? Why does Father John spend so much time onscreen in only his underwear? Is the movie trying to eroticize the male form, and, if so, why is it so bad at it? John just looks lost and confused, even when wandering his bedroom.



For the scholar of religion, the plotline here will recall a core trope of occult modernity. As literary theorist Gauri Viswanathan has argued,¹ one of the distinctive features of Christianity is the way in which it encodes within itself a historical narrative about its overcoming of earlier religions: the various paganisms of the ancient Mediterranean world. This conceptual fissure within the cultural fabric of the Christian West then becomes a means by which cultural dissenters are able to voice their dissent, taking heterodoxy as a site for cultural and political critique. The

history of modern occultism since the 19th century has amplified this procedure, reviving pagan gods to critique the West from within. And those new religious movements have a clear echo in the literary and pop-cultural forms that arose alongside them—including literary and filmic horror.

In *223 Wick*, as in other recent pop-cultural texts, we find a would-be pagan trying to revive an ancient Egyptian god, reinterpreted through the neo-pagan symbolism of the Freemasons. Our pagan conspirator is female—a typical-enough move both for genre fiction and occultist writing.



Decked out in a vampy red dress during the final sequence, Katarina stands in clear visual contrast to the film's bevy of somberly clad priests. If she's a villain, she's a fun villain, and it's hard not to root for her. She's also nearly the only female character in the film. (If a movie has two female characters with names, but one of them is literally eating the other one, is anyone even interested

enough to apply the Bechdel test? Also, what's with the weirdly roving prosthetic third eye on Katarina's sister's forehead?)



Plotlines about resurgent pagan gods usually entail some kind of displacement of Christianity. Often, this happens through a layering of supernatural histories. Thus, for instance, in the Netflix series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, we learn that there are older and more powerful forces in the cosmos than Lucifer, Jesus, and their lot, with different strata of supernatural history emerging at different times to menace the show's eponymous teenage witch and her scrappy band of buddies. ²²³ *Wick* interleaves the Christian and the neo-pagan in a perhaps similar way. Its nefarious, conspiratorial priests are keen to get in on the supernatural game unfolding at the Masonic lodge, including through real estate dealings. Their reasons may remain opaque (does

a Gun N' Roses escapee need reasons? Reasons are for chumps). But it seems like they want the power that the building represents.

There's a potential anti-Catholic valence here; the movie plucks genre strings tuned by several centuries of pulp fiction (from, say, Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, in 1796, to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, in 2003) in which priests are cloaked in conspiratorial colors. One should probably hesitate, however, before placing the full weight of this history on Father John's shoulders. Presumably the recent crises of the Catholic priesthood are somehow part of the cultural unconscious of this movie. Still, *223 Wick* is a specific kind of aesthetic object: low-budget schlock, which repurposes old genre conventions toward unforeseen ends. Bad movies are great partly because no one ever seems quite in control of where their stories and symbols end up. Anything could happen. New histories could emerge.

223 Wick is a slim treat. But it's a treat nonetheless— a snack best served during the slap-happy late-night hours and shared with friends.

¹ Gauri Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," *PMLA*, Vol. 123, Issue 2 (March 2008), pp. 466-476.