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Realm of Satan

Dereck Daschke

Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Realm of Satan* (2024), directed by Scott Cummings.

Keywords

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches "Religion and Film" at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



Realm of Satan (2024), dir. Scott Cummings

A goat gives birth as flies buzz around. A man carefully brushes black and white paint on his face. People walk through the woods with containers billowing dark smoke. A woman holds a dagger, which begins to levitate. Another woman sits cross-legged, reading a book, also levitating. A man prepares deviled eggs in his kitchen, then walks to the oven, revealing he is standing on goat's legs. An orgy of men and women in black latex gimp suits. A raven climbs atop a sleeping woman. A man in a wheelchair climbs into bed, and a body of light rises out of him and turns into an inverted cross.

These are just a few of the phantasmagoria that make up *Realm of Satan*, Scott Cummings's semi-/pseudo-documentary about, and with, The Church of Satan. Beginning with a quote from Anton Le Vay, founder of The Satanic Church, declaring this to be the Age of Satan, the audience soon gets glimpses of people around the world, engaged in behavior that, out of context, lies somewhere between the mundane and the eccentric, though nothing overtly nefarious or "evil."

These images segue into a Satanic prayer recited, again, by individuals around the globe, each phrase picking up where the previous one left off, but in another language—English, German, Norwegian, Spanish, etc. A viewer might be expecting a cinematic study of the day-to-day lives of various members of The Satanic Church, what Satanism means to them, how their religious practices are and are not like those of other faiths, with a goal of demystifying the religion for the uninitiated. This is not that film.

Instead, *Realm of Satan* adamantly defies presenting its subject in any coherent fashion. In fact, it seems to actively want the viewer to dislike the film (a sense borne out by the steady stream of audience members walking out of the screening I attended), even if not necessarily the people it depicts. The non-linear, non-narrative, snapshot impressions of the practitioners are clearly by design. However, just as one might begin to settle into this kind of representation of a unique religious culture, about halfway through the run time, the images become more magical and surreal, which then calls into question the reality of everything one has seen previously and, now, going forward. Clearly everything is staged for the camera, to be sure, but rather than asking the viewer to appreciate the film as a detached, “objective” depiction of the lived lives of Satanists, it suddenly seems to be presenting something closer to a representation of how Satanists see themselves, or at least their most idealized version of themselves.

One moment where this straddling the line between reality and fiction is problematic, perhaps, concerns the alleged arson of the “Halloween House” of a “Joe Netherworld,” whom the audience never sees on screen directly but who appears on recorded media that other figures in the film are watching. (Even the credits list him as “In abstentia.”) The film presents what is ostensibly a news report about the arson that includes apparent video of the moment of the attack itself. However, the anchor signs off of the report as “Louis Cypher”—not just an obvious euphemism

for Lucifer but the actual name of Robert De Niro's Satanic character in *Angel Heart* (1987). The film shows footage of the Halloween House being torn down in the aftermath of the fire, and one of the movie's recurring church members posts a sign in the vacant lot where the house stood advertising a reward for information about the arson of "\$6,666." Given the other tricks that *Realm of Satan* presents as real, a critical viewer may be skeptical about the truth of such an attack. Inasmuch as there's the suggestion that the arson may have been motivated by religious hostility (perhaps from one of those they curse, in the final scene of the film, as a "God adorer" and a "worshipper of the Nazarene eunuch"), thus engendering some sympathy for this group, the uncertainty around the facts of the attack left me, at least, feeling a bit manipulated. Like Satanism itself, this film is likely for a very niche crowd, and not everything about it is what it appears to be.