
Nuns and Guns: The Bizarre World of Italian Cult Cinema

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Week 8: Nunsploitation

Nuns on Screen

- The fact that certain women chose to devote themselves to God, donning odd costumes, in hidden-away places was a concept that began to fascinate at least cinematically.
- This mystery was heightened, possibly in the 70s, when often nuns would be no more than stock characters or background scenery in TV shows, and more importantly, horror films.
- The idea that previously faithful, virginal personas might be possessed or controlled by evil forces, is a powerful one
- Movies like Hammer's *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976), based on the Dennis Wheatley novel of the same name, played with our fears of the unknown and a sense of titillation. Christopher Lee's excommunicated priest and his devilish Children of the Lord cult, with its twisted female followers, certainly fed into this strange little fetishist enclave of mid-decade popular culture.
- Even the all-encompassing *Star Wars* (1977) appears to tie in with this. Its visions of an ancient religious order being corrupted by a malevolent presence seem to somehow reflect this obsession.
- Vader especially, almost resembles a weird version of a nun, his bizarre costuming, devotion to a patriarchal force and sexlessness, mark him as a drag futuristic pseudo-sister of mercy.
- But the preoccupation with these particular bad habits would explode briefly with the mainly Italian nunsploitation efforts of the early 70s. But to get to why that particular peccadillo caused a splash at that time we will have to go back to a slightly earlier period in history.

Context

- In the 1930s pre-code scare fests like *Island of Lost Souls* (1931) and Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) had caused widespread consternation and outright bans in many territories but with the tightening of censorship in Britain and America, more deliberately alluring or offensive material was largely pushed out of the hands of eager to please large studios and into those of the so-called 'poverty row' independents.
- The 50s saw a rise in the true exploitation B-feature, in America companies like AIP (American Independent Pictures), mindful of the way teenagers had been ignored by mainstream cinema, sought to tap into that market by offering wonderfully garish drive-in fodder like *I was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), *Bucket of Blood* (1959) or *How to Make a Monster* (1958).
- Not only that, cheapo biopics based on headline-grabbing stories of the day were hastily put out for inquisitive adult audiences, with Ed Wood's infamous sex change weirdness *Glen or Glenda* (1953) being an obvious example.
- In the 60s, European Mondo movies provided cheap entertainment and nudity under the respectable and misleading banner of documentary film making. This eventually inspired a brief splurge in work that crossed the line between fact and fantasy.
- Gory delights like the *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) with its mix of bloody fictions and actual animal killing were influenced by those earlier 'reality' pieces of the 60s.

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Context (cont...)

- But it was the 70s and 80s where exploitation essentially came into its own, when Italian directors and producers, especially, took the idea of 'exploitation' to its glorious heights and depraved lows.
- By taking a simple formula like the Giallo movie, slasher, cannibal feature or crime thriller and repeating that format add infimum, Italian filmmakers, perhaps more than those in any other European country were able to exploit not only extreme subject matter and peoples' fascination with those topics but they were also able to exploit ideas themselves, often stretching concepts till they either became brilliant or ridiculous or sometimes both.
- One such inroad of cinema was the 70s Nunsploitation cycle. Though Nunsploitation features still have a presence in cult cinema today, with examples like *St Agatha* (2018) crossing over into more recent times, much of what we associate with that particular sub-genre is linked to that turbulent decade of flares, fun and political fireworks.

The Devils (1971)

- Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), a blisteringly divisive and outrageously controversial horror, released the same year as Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) and Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), became another thorn in the side of British censors and religious groups, it's torture scenes are still difficult to swallow even now and parts of it remain as yet unreleased.
- Yet it is also a beautifully produced, vividly political work replete with the director's custom brand of eccentricity and gob-smacking imagery, helped in no short measure by David Watkins's wonderfully nuanced cinematography and production design by a young Derek Jarman.
- In order to gain an X certificate Russell made minor cuts to the more explicit nudity
- Some shots of Grandier's legs being crushed were cut
- The biggest cuts were made by the studio prior to submission to the BBFC
- These included a two-and-a-half-minute sequence of naked nuns sexually assaulting a statue of Christ and the masturbating scene
- 'My only political film' – Ken Russell
- Common sense and honesty (in the form of Grandier) is demonised and presented to the masses as 'the other' before literally being sacrificed by a hypocritical elite.
- Once he's out the way the elite turn on the same masses. It's like a bonkers and beautifully realised critique of every Tory/UKIP/Trump style manifesto
- Based partly on Aldous Huxley's novel *The Devils of Loudun*, John Whiting's play *The Devils* and documented historical accounts, *The Devils* highlights the cruelties and humiliations heaped on the brainwashed masses and scapegoated individuals by corrupted officials and authority types at the top of the vicious patriarchal system.
- In many ways, it would also provide the template for a host of less celebrated and arguably more salacious material such as *Flavia the Heretic* (1974), *The Sinful Nuns of St Valentine* (1974) and two pictures by Domenico Paolella, *The Story of a Cloistered Nun* (1973) and *The Nun and the Devil* (1973).

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Flavia the Heretic (1974)

- Salacious yes but it also leans heavily on a more feminist agenda
- Men are certainly presented as the criminals within the context of the story
- Women may be the main victims of the male crimes, but they are also cast as symbolic figures – priests, saviours, soldiers and eventually martyrs
- The film also riffs on the theme of corruption – corruption of humanity, corruption of religious dogma and corruption of power systems

The Nun and the Devil (1973)

- Though the opening credits of *The Nun and the Devil* claim the piece to be based on true accounts, it's clear that Paoletta's agenda here is not attention to historical accuracy.
- Yet while there is titillation and torture on offer it's also more restrained than one may first anticipate
- Filmed in lush Technicolor, the convent-set production provides us with a similar tale of male corruption and abuse of power as detailed in Russel's film, yet it also harks back to Jerzy Kawalerowicz's sixties' effort *Mother Joan of the Angels* (1961) both in tone, storytelling and visual composition.
- The latter is presented in stark monotone, suggesting something as real as it fantastical
- Paoletta's film is decorated by rich velvet reds, at times giving it the look of a Roger Corman Poe picture, both pieces exude a bleakly affecting sense of doom.
- *Mother Joan of the Angels* as little known as it is with more general cinemagoers, would arguably influence a whole range of horrors, not only can echoes of it be found in *The Devils*, (they were both based on the same historical case), and *The Omen* (1976), the infamous 'spider-walk' in Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) uncannily resembles a specific scene from the former
- But being an Italian exploitation piece, *The Nun and the Devil* at times becomes less suggestive and more outright shock and awe.
- Scenes towards the end, when a handful of novices and the Mother Superior are subjected to a brutal inquisition, are deeply unpleasant and reflect not only an audience desire for violent spectacle but they also partly pay tribute to perhaps the first bone fide nunsploitation flick ever made.

Haxan (1922)

- *Haxan* (1922), written, directed and starring Benjamin Christensen, is a gloriously garish and out of place spectacle rammed with visual delights and sordid pleasures.
- Meant to be a serious examination of witchcraft through the ages, detailing how, amongst other things, mental health might have been a factor in terms of what many considered to be the manifestation of evil forces, it largely fails in this sense, as much of its 'findings' appear hopelessly dated and its inability to fully explore male orchestration in these matters renders it deeply flawed.
- However, what it does do exceptionally well, is to offer a bizarre and truly imaginative delve into the world of black magic, cruelty and torture.

Haxan (cont...)

- Told in four parts, the now almost a century-old piece still can shock, and many of its sequences are disturbingly not of their time. Images of black masses, devil worship and terrifyingly real looking demons dance before our eyes in a magnificently debauched shadow play that falls somewhere between David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- *Haxan's* most harrowing moments undoubtedly occur during the torture sequences where innocent women are tormented with medieval devices and brutal acts of punishment.

The Nun and the Devil (1974)

- And it is these segments that *The Nun and the Devil* seems to borrow most heavily from. This is not to say that most of it is not decidedly more restrained, at least when it comes to out and out violence.
- This wouldn't be the kind of period nunsploitation piece that it is without its fair share of solicitous carnal knowledge, lesbian affairs and all manner of murky goings-on, but the underlining message about male oppression and the scapegoating of young girls to gain power and pull illicit property scams never loses out to the more suggestive sex-a-thon and the cast acquit themselves admirably.
- French actor Luc Merenda fresh from roles in a handful of spaghetti westerns and Sergio Martino's dark Giallo, *Torso* (1973), makes for a great conflicted official, stuck between the worlds of demented religious zealots and greedy aristocrats.
- But much of the plot is carried along by its female players.
- Anne Heywood as Julia is an icily brilliant Mother Superior, unhampered by morals in her bloody quest for control
- However, when everything comes to a head during the final act of the feature, the 'sins' of these accused women somehow pale into insignificance when compared to the humiliations and suffering they are forced to endure.
- Julia, sentenced to death, chooses to take poison and her protracted death throes as she struggles on the stone floor as the beleaguered heretic, seems to foreshadow the closing scenes of Pascal Laugier's horrifically sadistic *Martyrs* (2008).
- *The Nun and the Devil*, despite never quite matching the visual flair of Russell's *The Devils* or indeed the cerebral artistry of *Mother Joan of the Angels*, does provide us with a delightfully blasphemous tale of sex, sedition, subplots and subterfuge, which manages to be part soft porn romp and part Hammer horror.
- Aesthetically, it's essentially Rasputin the Mad Monk meets Emmanuelle, an extremely good-looking religious melodrama, where the hands of trusted church officials drip not only with expensive jewellery but with the cardinal red blood of a group of women who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time in history.
- At times, we might be exposed to the heat of passion but Paoella never lets us forget the coldness which is at the heart of this sordidly oppressive narrative of authoritarian corruption.
- The convent location, with its bare stone walls, cell-like rooms and emptiness acts as a solid and dank realisation of our worst fears, but in a more exploitative sense, it also reinforces that this sub-genre shares much in common with that other 60s/70s staple, the 'women in prison film'. But the space used makes us feel both lost in its echoing loneliness and trapped in its cloying claustrophobia.

The 'Caged Women' Scene

- The Women in Prison sub-genre ran parallel to the Nunsplotation phase of the same era and shared many similar tropes.
- These strange yet simplistic tales of locked doors, sex and stylised brutality but also sought to mix in yet another element, that of the black Emmanuelle movies.
- Starring Laura Gemser these questionable soft-porn efforts, not satisfied with being mere tits and arse features, also tried to tap into other areas as well as providing the obligatory nudity and sexploitation.
- Titles like *The Dirty Seven* (1982), *Sister Emmanuelle* (1977) and *Emmanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (1977) meant that the sexually reductive protagonist was able to transport a form of erotically charged objectification into the arena of horror, the war film and the isolated convent.