
SATANIC PANIC!

THE DEVIL ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Week 1: Please allow me to introduce myself...

The Devil and Hell

Over three hundred years before the English Civil War began, Italian poet, writer and philosopher Dante Alighieri completed his most famous work *The Divine Comedy*. Though he would die just a year after finishing the book that had taken him 12 years to produce, its ideas and imagery would stretch seemingly forever into his unlive future.

The visions he spoke about in *Inferno* detailing the nine circles of Hell still influence the world of popular fiction and horror. The ghastly depictions he conceived can still send disturbed shivers down the back of even the most hardened of horror fans.

At Hell's deepest depths, this frozen body of water acts as a prison for only the most treacherous of sinners. Guest of honour is, of course, the greatest deceiver of all - Judas Iscariot - forever encased in ice staring helplessly and pathetically into an unreachable eternity. But of course, the very centre of Dante's Hell is occupied by the Devil himself

According to Fred Gettings in his *Dictionary of Demons*:

"The word 'devil' is from the same root as 'DEVA' which indicates that the Devil (and his devils) were once among the higher gods (and thus concerned with the proper development of humanity), but for some reason they fell from their high estate into a position where they now oppose the evolution of the human race."

But in terms of Western versions of this ultimate villain many have speculated that his look, particularly his cloven hooves is merely a bastardised reworking of Pagan Deity Pan. This makes sense in the context of the Devil being created by early Christian evangelists to encapsulate the imagery of non-believer heathens into a handy symbolic monster, to discredit and literally 'demonise' older belief systems.

In that sense, the Devil might be seen as the world's first ret-conned character. But Pagan gods were not the only older deities to face some crude demonic demotion. Many of the old Egyptian gods were given a degrading Christian makeover to downgrade ancient and 'unworthy' forms of worship. Though many of these were classed as demonic, some have suggested that Typhon, described as having '...one hundred snake heads' may also have been one of the aesthetic origins for the European 'Devil'. The same might also be said of the all-powerful Ahriman, a Babylonian evil deity who opposed the sun god Ahura Mazda.

Satanic Panic! (1970s and 1980s)

More recently, under the Satanic Panic of the late 70s and 80s, combined effects of Reagan, the Cold War, the growing generation gap, and influx of 'new Hollywood' with its shocking imagery and downbeat anti-heroes, plus the rise of Women's Lib and gay rights movements, provided, at least from a 'moral majority' viewpoint, a less simple, more decadent society which, like the continuing 'threat' of Judaism back in the dark ages, became something which was deemed as Satanic or at least ungodly.

During this period, arguably any attempts to live a less conformed lifestyle were attacked. And while some of these attacks were predictably aimed at the usual suspects ranging from heavy metal bands, comic books, Dungeons and Dragons and horror movies, on a more serious note other institutions, groups and individuals were being targeted by this wave of national hysteria.

- Jail sentences were doled out, lives were ruined, some even lost their livelihoods or more shockingly their lives, often without a scrap of evidence being presented.
- Satanism has been used as an excuse to attack feminism, homosexuality, Islam, Judaism and people of colour.
- Interestingly, some of the earliest victims of the Satanic Panic were day-care centre nurseries.
- Some have argued that this was an attempt to undermine the workplace achievements of some lower middle-class or working-class women, who were forced 'back home' to take care of children when nurseries closed in light of this panic.

The Devil's Origins on the Screen

But, whatever the origins of Satan, after the likes of Milton and Dante had forged his personality in the fires of hellish mythology, it would still be a good few centuries before the moving pictures began and the Devil could spread his wings on the silver screen.

Early examples of the Devil on Screen:

Le Manoir du Diable (1896)

The Devil's Assistant (1917)

The Devil (1921)

Haxan (1922)

Benjamin Christensen

- A Swedish/Danish documentary style silent horror
- A mix of dramatized scenes and 'studies' depicting witchcraft (or supposed witchcraft) and medieval torture
- At the time, it was the most expensive Scandinavian film ever made
- Banned in the US and heavily censored in other countries for its depictions of torture, nudity and sexual depravity

- Much of its imagery could have been ripped from the canvas of Hieronymus Bosch
- Based (in part) on *Malleus Maelficarum* – a German 15th century ‘guide for inquisitors’
- The lengthy film is split into four parts

The Structure

- 1) A ‘study’ of medieval accounts of demons and witches
- 2) A series of vignettes examining superstition and beliefs around Satan and witchcraft
- 3) A story used to demonstrate how suspected witches were dealt with in the middle ages – contains explicit torture scenes
- In Part 4 – Christensen seems to be making the claim that most women who were accused of ‘witchcraft’ were actually ‘mentally ill’
- There is a sort of ‘ham fisted’ psychiatry at play

Inconsistencies

- Part 4 of the film feels full of contradictions and (unintentional) ironies
- Christensen talks about the advances in psychiatry – stating the way ‘disturbed women’ are treated in mental hospitals is much more humane, when in fact, women in particular were often treated appallingly at that time.
- There is no issue raised about the treatment of women patients for ‘Hysteria’
- Christensen asserts that the victims of witch hunts were probably suffering from afflictions like kleptomania or somnambulism
- There is no mention of the abuse caused at the hands of a land hungry upper class or church officials aiming to retain power.

Faust (1927)

- Made in Germany at UFA studios
- Filming took six months, at a cost of 2 million RM
- At least five different versions of the film were released
- Differences included – longer/shorter versions, edits, alternative camera angles etc.
- Mephisto bets with an angel that he can corrupt a righteous man (Faust)
- It’s an example of a later German Expressionist film
- However, its look seems to borrow from medieval art and also carries a William Blake feel

“...Faust is a wonderful example of German expressionism. It is filled with striking images. Light and dark are beautifully controlled to contrast good and evil. Jannings uses his face and body to produce a portrait of evil, the seeming benevolent, yet malevolent and manipulating, devil who cheats and injures Faust even as he gratifies him. Ekman and Horn are beautiful looking and emotionally poignant as the doomed lovers.”

Obscure Hollywood

- *Faust* was initially a financial and critical flop
- Critics reacted negatively to the differences between the original text and cinematic version