
The Devils and The Devil's Advocates

The Devil's Advocates series (Auteur, 2011-)

Darren Arnold, *The Devils* (Auteur, 2019)

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The Devil's Advocates series

Since 2011 John Atkinson - editor-in-chief and overseer of the monograph series Devil's Advocates, the horror arm of Auteur Publishing - has been putting out highly readable and accessible scholarly publications devoted to a diverse array of horror cinema, ranging from the contemporary to the classic by way of popular horror, cult, extreme art-house and more. From post-war British horror cinema to American splatter films to the Italian *gialli* of Dario Argento and Mario Bava, these pocket-sized, portable case studies (the glossy black covers, with a mysterious window offering a tantalising peek at the film in question, have become a recognisable trademark) showcase the work and research of both new and established scholars in the field of genre cinema. The series also offers a useful primer to the uninitiated and showcases a diverse range of historical, ideological and critical approaches to the genre. These studies - whose slim and convenient packaging belies the weight and scope of the critical inquiry within - provide a platform for horror scholars and fans to engage with contemporary and cutting-edge research in the field. The series offers some enthralling and surprising titles, ranging from the more esoteric and specialist - e.g., Kat Ellinger on the vampire horror *Daughters of Darkness* (1971) (due December 2019), Roberto Curti on Mario Bava's eminent *giallo* movie *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), and Luke Apell on David Cronenberg's body horror *Shivers* (1975) - to the more popular and renowned - Markus K. Harmes on the Hammer classic *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), James Marriot on Neil Marshall's claustrophobic caving horror film *The Descent* (2005), Laura Mee on *The Shining* (1980), and Murray Leeder on John Carpenter's seminal slasher *Halloween* (1978). The Devil's Advocates catalogue is rapidly widening, with additions such as Simon Brown's excellent recent book on George Romero's portmanteau collaboration with Stephen King, *Creepshow* (1982).

Darren Arnold's book on Ken Russell's fiery, confrontational, controversial, and iconoclastic masterwork *The Devils* (1971) is one of the more recent editions (published in June 2019), finding its place within Devil's Advocates' ever-growing list of titles devoted to British horror cinema. Others include Ian Cooper's book on Michael Reeves' prominent folk horror film *Witchfinder General* (1968) and Jez Conolly on Ealing Studio's 1945 portmanteau horror classic *Dead of Night*. Arnold's book will be discussed in more detail below. However, this recent publication

is not simply a useful addition to the Devil's Advocates series, but a valuable contribution to an ever-growing body of critical contemporary scholarship in the field of Russell studies.

While Devil's Advocates is increasingly looking to older, classic horror cinema - Cristina Massacessi's book on F. W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, for instance - there are surprisingly few non-Western examples of the genre, other than Marisa Hayes' 2017 book on Takashi Shimizu's terrifying 2004 Japanese film *Ju-On: The Grudge*. When discussing the series, editor-in-chief Atkinson has, however, revealed a desire to move in this direction, with Korean horror *The Wailing* (Na-Hong Jinn, 2017) and Iranian vampire film *A Girl Walks Home Alone* (Ana-Lily Amapour, 2017) being potential titles for future publications. Given the upswing of scholarly and fan interest in global horror cinema - as evidenced by the annually popular *Fear2000* horror conferences at Sheffield Hallam University (organised by Craig Mann, Rose Butler and Shelley O'Brien) that have been running since 2016 (Atkinson is a regular presence, with a table full of books and an eye out for potential new authors) - more international, non-Western titles are surely forthcoming.

One of the major advantages of the series is that the work of emerging researchers is not only able to sit, comfortably, alongside that of more recognised authors, journalists and scholars; it is given equal weight. Devil's Advocates' approach is truly democratic. This gives them - in this reviewer's opinion - something of an edge over other, rival film-monograph series (from the BFI for instance), whose range is limited largely to publishing the writing of "named" authors and established scholars.

Discussing the series, Atkinson revealed that it attempts to strike a balance between erudite scholarly discussion and commercial viability - something that it does very well indeed - and that when the series started out, its aim was to put out material on films which were not the "usual suspects" and had not been covered ad infinitum in other lofty critical tomes. The series expanded its scope, however, with the realisation that a whole set of new scholars were finding more innovative ways of re-interpreting and understanding the old lags of the genre. The blurb on the back covers reads:

Devil's Advocates is a series devoted to exploring the classics of horror cinema. Contributors to Devil's Advocates come from the world of teaching, academia, journalism and fiction, but all have one thing in common: a passion for the horror film and for sharing that passion.

That Devil's Advocates is committed also to providing a platform for

newer writers and emerging scholars to showcase and articulate their research in the field is, of course, not to say that their output is in any way slight in terms of critical weight, or that the academic identity or inquiry of the books is in any way diminished. These monographs present discussions of the texts which are scholarly, without a doubt, yet appeal to *both* fans and scholars alike: the series recognises that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Contributors to the series are both scholars of the genre *and* fans, and, as such, the books have a wide demographic appeal

***The Devils* by Darren Arnold (2019)**

The Devils is a bold and interesting choice for Devil's Advocates. Russell famously denied that it *was* a horror film, commenting that it was his "only political film". Along with the relatively new addition of Lindsay Hallam's 2018 book on David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), it joins an increasing rollcall of titles in the catalogue that test and stretch the boundaries and definitions of how we understand the genre. Certainly, and famously, *The Devils* contains a number truly horrific, confrontational, and traumatic moments (the torture and execution of Oliver Reed's Father Urbain Grandier or the "exorcism" via enema of boiling water administered to Vanessa Redgrave's Sister Jeanne of the Angels). Moreover, it *has* previously been considered within the broader frameworks of British horror cinema (specifically, I. Q. Hunter examines it within a wider discussion of folk horror in his book *British Trash Cinema* [BFI, 2013]) and British art cinema (see *British Art Cinema: Creativity, Experimentation and Innovation* [Brian Hoyle and Paul Newland, eds., 2019]).

The film is famous, even notorious, within British film culture as one of a run of releases, including *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), *Last Tango In Paris* (Bertolucci, 1973), and *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971), that proved so challenging for chief BBFC censor Stephen Murphy that he lasted a mere three years in the job. Accordingly, it has also frequently been included both within broader studies of post-war British Cinema. Of course, it has been central to critical discourse around the Russell canon, as can be seen in relatively recent studies, such as Kevin Flanagan's 2009 edited collection *Ken Russell: Re-viewing England's Last Mannerist* and Paul Sutton's conversational 2014 tome *Talking About Ken Russell*. It has also played a fundamental part in the established scholarship around Russell's work, through studies by authors including Rev. Gene Phillips, Joseph Gomez and the American critic Ken Hanke.

Surprisingly, however, other than author Richard Crouse's anecdotal and entertaining 2015 book *Raising Hell: Ken Russell and the Unmaking of the Devils* and *The Devils: Ken Russell: Pocket Movie Guide* (Jeremy Mark Robinson, 2015), there have been surprisingly few defining scholarly

works dedicated solely to *The Devils*. Arnold's book hopes to be it - and to a large extent it succeeds. There is much to commend about his inquiry into the film: it is informed and incisive, particularly so given the fairly compact word limit; and certainly, given its themes of witchcraft and possession (there is not enough room in this review to go into the intricacies of the plot - for which you need to read Arnold's book or, better still, watch the film!), it fits within a subset of Devil's Advocates titles which deal with those very themes. Other comparative titles include: Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's book on the pre-eminent *giallo* folk horror *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977), which, in terms of its spectacular, monumental art-house production design and its depiction of hysteria and trauma, is perhaps one of the most comparable in the Devil's Advocates canon to *The Devils* - although they are markedly different films; Martyn Conterio's book on Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960); and even - and this is stretching the comparison somewhat - Peter Turner on *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

Arnold's discussion of *The Devils* is a rich and insightful mix of personal recollection and scholarly erudition. He gets the balance right, dispatching discussion of his personal history and relationship with the film after the introduction. It does tend to rely a little too much on Russell's biography, *A British Picture*, as a critical source. While this is a hugely entertaining read - laugh out loud in some parts - and offers insight into Russell's life and career via the director's raconteur-like oratory, he is not always the most reliable narrator on his own life. He has a penchant for deliberately and entertainingly self-mythologizing and re-constructing his own history at times. However, this aside, Arnold has clearly done the research, and the diverse range of critical sources listed at the end of the book attests to this. My only quibble here is that I was left wondering if the author had made use of the material housed at the BFI Special Collections and other places pertaining to the film's production, especially to the role played by production designer Derek Jarman, creator of the film's epic, monumental and expressionistic sets. The relationship between Russell and his protégé, Jarman, is central to the creation and production history of this searing masterpiece, and I felt that the book lacked a sense of engagement with this aspect of production. Arnold does include a brief discussion of Jarman and the film's set design in Chapter Two of the book, "Authorship and Adaptation" - noting how at odds it is with Aldous Huxley's description of the walled city in his 1952 account *The Devils of Loudun* - but it is never a major part of the book's inquiry.

However, with such a multifarious film to discuss, one with such a complex history and narrative, tough choices over what to include have to be made, and Arnold more than makes up for this omission in other ways. One of the major strengths of the book is the attention it pays paid to the

three-way relationship between Russell's film and its source materials: Huxley's book and John Whiting's 1961 play *The Devils*. Of all the literature on *The Devils*, Arnold's book presents, probably, the most in-depth discussion of the issue of authorship and adaptation in relation to Huxley and Whiting since Joseph Gomez's in *Ken Russell: The Adaptor as Creator* (1976). The result is one of the strongest chapters in the book, as Arnold deconstructs the politics of adapting these sources and the historical (and hysterical) events at their core: the alleged possession and exorcism of a convent of Ursuline nuns by devils in 1643, Loudun, France, and the subsequent scapegoating, torture and immolation of the town's priest, Father Urbain Grandier. Arnold reminds us that if Huxley is the first to recount these events in his book and Whiting's play draws on Huxley, Russell "selectively draw[s] from across all three" and, in doing so, produces one of the most identifiably Russellian films (or, at least, the film with which he is most identified).

Arnold begins his discussion with some engaging personal reflection on his own historical relationship with *The Devils*, which he suggests he came to after seeing *Women In Love* (1969) at a young age. It was a gateway for him to experience Russell's work more broadly - of which he is slightly, and unjustly, dismissive, particularly the later films. In his introduction, he lays a foundation for his discussion, briefly mentioning the furore around the film's release and the censorship issues which persist to this day. However, on this matter, it is to the book's benefit that Arnold does not allow these issues to dominate his discussion over the course of the next hundred or so pages. Russell's conflict with Warner Bros., the British censors, Mary Whitehouse, etc., is of course central to the film's surrounding narrative, and becomes retroactively and meta-textually reflected in the film's own narrative, specifically around the oppressive control of church and state and the power of the individual. However it is a story that has been thoroughly accounted for elsewhere, and Arnold wisely waits until the sixth, and penultimate, chapter of the book, "Versions and Censorship", to deal with it. Interesting is the treatment of the infamous, much mythologised and missing-until-2002 "Rape of Christ sequence", in which a rampaging orgy of nude nuns remove an enormous crucifix from the wall and simulate a variety of sex acts upon it. The sequence horrified Warner Bros., to the extent that they still will not release the full cut nearly 50 years on, and the British censors, who recommended making seventeen cuts to the film; Russell grudgingly acceded in a letter to chief censor John Trevelyan, stamped with the symbol of the Inquisition. Arnold, however, recognises the removed sequence as "a fairly silly addition to *The Devils* and one which both distracts and detracts from the rest of the film" - a "jarring anomaly which does virtually nothing to propel the narrative". He spends a good couple of pages on this critique of the sequence. While it is refreshing to read a view on this contentious and controversial sequence that stands in

opposition to received wisdom about the film - especially given the demand to see the full cut restored and finally re-released - it is not one that this reviewer readily agrees with, feeling that the removal of the sequence diminishes the disorienting and overpowering nature of the sequence. However, Arnold does rightly point out that Russell himself had told critic Mark Kermode (who discovered the missing footage) that even he felt that the film worked without the sequence. Arnold is keen to point out in his chapter on "Versions and Censorship" - which offers a succinct account of the film's relationship with the censor and the versions of the film which have been available over the years - that the uncontrolled and unrestrained "form" of the uncut sequence is problematic and tips the film into "exploitation" (or more specifically "nunsploitation") territory. While I do not agree with this reading, I did appreciate this counter viewpoint and its inclusion in the book.

As mentioned earlier, *The Devils* adds to an increasing list of Devil's Advocates books on films that stretch the definition of horror. In Chapter Three, "Genre", Arnold deconstructs the generic make-up of the film. Right at the start, he saliently observes that it is now fairly "common" to see *The Devils* "lumped in" with other horror programming at festivals, screenings, on DVD shelves, etc. This categorisation is misleading, and, as Arnold indicates, even if the film was not designed as a horror film, it "possibly ends up as one". *The Devils*, Arnold suggests, might be seen as a historical drama that "dovetails" with the horror film - although we, as viewers, are aware there is no supernatural element in the film. In assessing the film's credentials, Arnold nevertheless draws on a comparable range of (sometimes surprising) horror films, and he offers a fascinating extended comparison with William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), as well as Hammer's *The Witches* (1966) and (in terms of its relationship with the BBFC) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). He also punctures the idea that *The Devils* might be viewed as a folk-horror film - a point I readily agree with.

Throughout the book Arnold offers a strong and coherent study of Russell's film, considering it thematically and generically, while discussing its contexts and approaches to gender and sexuality. He concludes by considering the legacy of *The Devils*. Without wishing to give too much more away, Arnold presents the thesis that the film is actually atypical for an early 1970s production and argues that it evades easy categorisation for a number of reasons (industrial, generic, cultural). Arnold astutely locates the film's legacy not entirely within the horror genre but across a range of historical art-house dramas that themselves contain a set of similarly abrasive and shocking imagery.

With this book, Arnold sets himself an enormous task: to do justice to Russell's epic film and its extraneous contexts and issues within the fairly

limited parameters of a Devil's Advocates publication. Succeed he does, making clear (in his own words) "the importance of *The Devils* to and beyond the horror genre". It is a book that newcomers to Russell's film and wider body of work, as well as those already familiar with them, will glean much from.