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THE BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW (2021) BY DAVID EVANS-POWELL

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Evans-Powell, David. *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. Auteur Publishing, 2021. Devil's Advocates. 116 pp.

David Evans-Powell's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* was published by Auteur Publishing as part of their ongoing *Devil's Advocate* series, each book of which explores a single piece of horror cinema. The volume was published in 2021, the year of the film's 50th anniversary, and attempts to cover the production history and initial receptions to the film as well as introduce its themes and characters. At the same time, David Evans-Powell situates *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971, directed by Piers Haggard) within British culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, highlighting its importance in the trifecta of folk horror texts that were presented as a response to the time's massively popular Hammer Horror films. Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw* is commonly grouped together with its two, rather more well-known, contemporaries: *Witchfinder General* (1968, directed by Michael Reeves), and *The Wicker Man* (1973, directed by Robin Hardy). As Evans-Powell notes in his introductory chapter, he intends to "celebrate" the film which he views as having been "much maligned" in terms of contemporary opprobrium and revised appreciation and "hidden in the shade of its more celebrated bedfellows" (9-10).

Given the subject matter of the film, please be advised that this review will contain discussions of a rape scene. The film itself is simultaneously simple and tricky to sum up adequately. A small English village in the early 1700s becomes prey to satanic powers with the unearthing of a number of bestial body parts from a furrowed field. The plot then splits into two distinct storylines, each exploring an aspect of the encroaching satanic presence in the village. In the manor house, Isobel Banham does not approve of her nephew Peter Edmonton's fiancée Rosalind and insists that she spends the night at the attic. In the night, a mysterious presence terrifies Rosalind who starts screaming uncontrollably, causing the household to run to the attic. The following day as Rosalind is about to be collected for Bedlam (a psychiatric hospital), she discovers that her right hand has turned into a gruesome claw, which she then uses to scratch Isobel. Rosalind is taken to Bedlam and Isobel is taken to bed with a fever, presumably caused by her injury. Soon after, Isobel disappears, never to be seen – or mentioned – for the remainder of the film. In the village, the teenaged Angel Blake discovers a beast's claw in the field and takes it with her. She proceeds to become the film's main antagonist, the self-made priestess of a devil-worshipping cult made of most of Angel's peers. Many villagers are quickly marked with the skin of the beast growing in patches on their bodies and Angel and her followers attempt to harvest those pieces in order to help the entity regain a corporeal form. In the course of the film Angel commits a number of transgressions as she attempts to seduce the

curate, lies, kills, and leads the cult to commit the horrific rape and murder of Cathy Vespers, easily the film's most controversial and horrific scene. Eventually, Peter summons the Judge, who returns to the village and leads a mob to interrupt the cult's ceremony, kills Angel Blake, and succeeds in burning the corporeal form of the demon.

Evans-Powell's book is fragmented, rather like the film it is analysing, with each chapter covering a different aspect of the film. "Production and Reception" covers the technical aspects of the film, providing some short biographies of the creative team involved as well as details on the film's development, reception, and legacy. This chapter is informative and well researched, presenting what would be dry information in an engaging and efficiently communicative manner. The chapter is oddly weighted, however, as Evans-Powell often devotes pages on biographical information, a decision which leaves some of the more intriguing sub-sections, such as the one on Ingmar Bergman's influence of the film, feeling rather under-developed and rushed.

The following two chapters "A Green and (Un)Pleasant Land" and "Nature and Civilization" discuss the film's rural setting as a way of unearthing its deeper themes: the tensions between city and wilderness, rural living and the urban, civilized society, reason and superstition. The film's pre-credits sequence is analysed in depth and Evans-Powell's close reading of it is fascinating, leading seamlessly into an analysis of the shifting landscapes of the film which he separates in five categories: the rural, the pastoral, the uncanny, the malign, and the resistant. Evans-Powell also writes in depth about Haggard's framing of the open countryside and the muted interior shots of the film. As Evans-Powell notes, Haggard had stated a desire to "avoid the excesses of Hammer's gothic horror films," which placed "a great emphasis on artificiality and sumptuousness," with a lot of the action being set indoors, showcasing the studio's "heavily ornamented sets" (31). It is in this section that Evans-Powell underlines the importance of *Blood on Satan's Claw* as a folk horror piece specifically, tracing the echoes of the way it depicts the uncanny English countryside in subsequent folk horror works reaching to the present day. The two chapters are perhaps the strongest of the volume and Evans-Powell's expertise as a historian and folk horror film scholar shines through in his discussion of Haggard's landscapes and sets and the integral part they play in the film's narrative.

Evans-Powell proceeds to turn his attention away from the land and towards the human agents of the film in "The Fiend and His Followers" and "Agents of Order." It is in those chapters that the fragmented structure of the book begins to work against Evans-Powell, as it proves to be difficult to discuss the film's characters without returning back to the analysis of its powerful landscape. Evans-Powell skilfully builds on his previous observations about the various meanings the countryside and the city take on in the film but these descriptions occasionally come across as repetitive, perhaps due to the brevity of each analytical section. The 'unearthing' of the fiend's remains becomes an analytical tool as Evans-Powell draws on Reza Negarestani's work on "relics from the past" from 2008's *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, in order to analyse the summoning of the demon and his subsequent hold on the village's populace. According to Evans-Powell, the fiend's remains fit Negarestani's definition of the "xenolithic artifact," describing its "baleful influence" that requires no "specific act of removal from the ground, summoning spell

or anything of that sort” to be unleashed, the second the remains are perceived (61). By reading the fiend’s remains as a xenolithic artifact, Evans-Powell can then place *Blood on Satan’s Claw* in conversation with a number of British television films from the late ‘60s to the late ‘70s, specifically adaptations of M. R. James’ story and other similarly antiquarian horror tales.

Finally, Evans-Powell returns to examining the world outside the film in his final chapter “Anarchy in the UK,” in which he traces the film’s contemporary influences, from the general state of political and cultural anxiety in the wake of the 1960s’ youth movements and the resurgence of the occult in Britain to very specific instances of violence such as the 1969 Mason Family murders in California and the 1968 case of Mary Bell in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It is an interesting chapter, which would again be incredibly useful as a prompt for further class discussion and analysis, but one that feels out of place at the end of the volume following such an in-depth examination of the film itself.

Evans-Powell’s writing throughout this short volume is interesting and engaging as well as informative, but there is a rising sense of unintentional conciseness in some of his arguments and analyses; many sections read like abstracts of longer papers, summarising and describing the arguments rather than providing in-depth explorations of them. It is clear that Evans-Powell is an extremely knowledgeable and insightful scholar, and when his arguments are given the necessary space to expand they are unfailingly compelling and rigorous, as shown especially in his sub-sections on Angel Blake and the multi-faceted figure of The Judge, inarguably the two central figures of the film. Where Evans-Powell’s analysis falls short, however, is in limiting its scope to specifically celebrating *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, providing a critical analysis that fails to criticise and occasionally feels shallow because of that focus on the film’s merits. *Blood on Satan’s Claw* is and will continue to be a polarising film. While there is a lot to commend it, it also rightfully invites criticism, both in terms of craft and in terms of how the film handles its subject matter. In his effort to celebrate the film, Evans-Powell does it a disservice by flattening those complexities of artistry and content.

Within the greater context of its publication history, the book is a success. Evans-Powell is meticulous in providing a lot of useful introductory information about the film that will undoubtedly prove helpful to future researchers, especially in a classroom setting or an undergraduate course. The very same conciseness that occasionally precludes it from delving deeper into its subject makes it a great tool for students, as it leaves a number of unanswered questions and implicitly provides prompts for further study in practically every page. *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* also succeeds in generating interest in a film that is still not so much popular as, perhaps, notorious. Ultimately, however, it leaves the reader wanting more in terms of analysis. While that might make the book a useful teaching tool, this very quality makes it an unsatisfactory resource for the researcher. Like the film it discusses, Evans-Powell’s volume frustrates and intrigues in equal measure. The book is a valuable entry-point for classroom engagement with the *Blood on Satan’s Claw* film, despite being somewhat over-eager to defend the artistic value of an interesting but flawed work, positioning *Blood on Satan’s Claw* as a prime example of Folk Horror without really exploring its more unsavoury aspects.

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Marita Arvaniti is a part-time PhD student in the University of Glasgow, UK, investigating the lasting effect theatre has had in the birth and evolution of contemporary fantasy literature. She is currently working as the Conference Administrative Assistant for the Once and Future Fantasies Conference (13-17 July 2022).