

Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen, Fordham University Press, 2021, 216pp.

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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BOOK REVIEW

Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema

Edited by Jeffrey Andrew
Weinstock and Regina M.
Hansen

Fordham University Press

2021

216pp.

Contemporary popular culture is filled with images of the satanic. However, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen claim, *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan*

and Cinema—their edited collection dealing with cinematic portrayals of the Devil—is “the first of its kind” to finally “give the devil his due” (10). This collection of thirteen essays seeks to introduce and expand the scholarly discussion on the satanic from the Devil to the Antichrist. Horror fans and scholars will find plenty to engage with here; however, a surprising number of essays extend beyond the conventional horror subjects, from animation to comedy, to biblical epics. All in all, the scope of the material and the many different approaches make *Giving the Devil His Due* a refreshing and informative read for anyone interested in the satanic in film.

Between the book’s striking cover, featuring the Antichrist child from *The Omen*, and its title, the suggestion is that these essays will explore depictions of the Devil primarily in horror films. However, *Giving the Devil His Due* is interested in the satanic and its relationship with film and filmmaking more broadly. In the introduction, Weinstock and Hansen highlight the many ways in which the satanic can take form: as an antagonist whose values need to be rejected (6), as a misunderstood and reclaimed progressive figure that should be embraced (9), and more generally, as “the absence of God” (10). Organized

chronologically according to their subject matter, all thirteen essays deal with at least one of these assertions. Starting with “The Sign of the Cross: George Méliès and Early Satanic Cinema,” Russ Hunter introduces another common theme among all the essays: the shared affinity between the satanic and the cinema for the art of illusion, trickery, and seduction (24). The major strength of this collection is that each essay continually reinforces this central claim that film form and the satanic are inherently linked.

A wide range of topics and approaches are introduced for the relationship between this broadly defined satanic and the medium of film. With J.P. Telotte’s “Disney Devils” and Katherine A. Fowkes’ “What’s the Deal with the Devil? The Comedic Devil in Four Films,” we move away from the horror genre into more comedic and silly portrayals of the Devil. Biblically inspired epics and their depictions of the Devil get some attention in Catherine O’Brien’s “Roaming the Earth:” Satan in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ*.” However, the volume does not solely focus on the explicit figure of the Devil, turning to other evocations of satanic evil. For example, in R. Barton Palmer’s “From Eternal Sea He Rises, Creating Armies on Either Shore: The Antichristology of *The Omen* Franchise,” the Antichrist, an extra-biblical figure, often found in evangelical end-time prophecies, becomes the main subject. Similarly, Weinstock’s “The Devil’s in the Detail: Devilish Desire and Roman Polanski’s *The Ninth Gate*” is more interested in the culture of the satanic or “the modern desire for [the Devil]” than the figure itself (136). Despite this variety, I am not convinced that this collection needed two essays on *Constantine*. While I understand the collection’s exclusion of TV series, such as *Lucifer* or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, there is the flamboyant devil of the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* or the satanic house of *The House of the Devil* that call out for coverage. Nonetheless, *Giving the Devil His Due* features a robust and diverse set of films from a variety of genres and closely related satanic elements.

Aside from its wide range of films, this collection highlights how the different supernatural evils come to represent and resist different societal issues. These essays offer insightful observations on how the Devil, as a cinematic metaphor, is used in popular filmic narrative and aesthetics. Katherine A. Fowkes insists that her filmic subjects “feature the devil as personifications for many ills” (69). Similarly, Simon Bacon argues, in his essay “Agency or Allowance: The Satanic Complications of Female Autonomy in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Witch*,” that while the Devil liberates women from patriarchal society, there is tension between the Devil as a liberator and as a masculine presence furthering the same system of oppression (159). The contradictions embodied by such devilish figures is furthered in David Sterritt’s “His Father’s

Eyes: *Rosemary's Baby*,” which again, shows tensions between the Devil as an agent of the patriarchy but also a tool for critiquing that very system (83). As stated in the introduction, this collection of essays follows from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s concept of monsters as “cultural bodies,” and ones that are inherently contradictory. Hansen and Weinstock write that the Devil in films provide narratives that are “reinforcing, although occasionally revising or calling into question entirely, a familiar belief system” (2).

While *Giving the Devil his Due* provides a fantastic introduction to the study of the satanic in film with plenty of different approaches and subjects, a significant challenge comes in how scholars might define the different elements of Judeo-Christian supernatural evils. Within this broad category and in the essays, we find both the capitalized forms of the “Devil,” “Satan,” and “Antichrist,” as well as their lowercase counterparts (i.e., “antichrist,” “devil,” and “satan”). In the introduction, the editors use “Satan” as an umbrella term meant to function interchangeably with these other concepts. Yet the lack of a clear definition of, and distinction among, these terms may lead to confusion for readers who may have a widely differing conception of these satanic figures. With the potential for such research to become a full-fledged field of study, there should be special attention to how scholars define these terms. Here, more terminological clarity would help to enrich the analyses.

Despite this caveat, the breadth of subjects and approaches in *Giving the Devil His Due* provide a solid introduction and suggest many avenues for future research. The focus on the metaphorical essence of the satanic here provides a great starting point for thinking about how we grapple with supernatural forms of evil. These thirteen essays provide plenty of fascinating analyses of a subject often neglected. As it stands, *Giving the Devil his Due*’s rich material will no doubt foster new and exciting research on the supernatural evil in media.

— Zachary Doiron

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