BOOK REVIEWS

Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film, by Carrol L. Fry. Bethlehem. Lehigh University Press, 2008. 301pp., hb., \$62.50/ £39.95. ISBN-13: 9780934223959.

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Carrol L. Fry's monograph is entertaining, though reasonably undemanding, to read and will be appreciated particularly by undergraduate students in courses on religion and film, religion and television, religion and popular culture, and—to a lesser extent—students of Western esotericism, Paganism and occult traditions. The book's first chapter, "Introduction: 'A Sound Magician Is a Mighty God': The Occult in Western Civilization" opens with the Christian rejection of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which is then linked to contemporary New Atheism. Fry argues that, between the Christian faith and Atheism, there lies a vast ocean of faiths and religions, a sub-group of which he terms "occult." What follows is a rapid sketch of the various forms of occult (hidden or esoteric) traditions in the history of the West (Hermes Trismegistus, Kabbalah, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, the Fox sisters and Spiritualism, Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy, Nazi occultists, and Gerald Gardner and Wicca), and a brief sketch of some films that feature some Nazi occult motifs, including George Lucas's *Indiana Jones* trilogy. The remainder of the book is organized in four quite lengthy chapters, with a brief conclusion rounding it out.

Fry's liking for "arty" titles is evident in Chapter 2, titled "'It is the dawning': The New Age in Film," which begins with the hippie musical *Hair* (the chapter's title is a line from "Age of Aquarius," one of the more famous songs from it), and moves to the fascination that America and the West in general has exhibited for the East since the nineteenth century, from the Transcendentalists to the Beatles and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The pattern of every chapter is that Fry reviews some of the scholarly literature on the subject to

hand (in this case, the New Age), then the bulk of the chapter consists of plot summaries of films, with certain motifs highlighted and linked back to the scholarship in a general fashion. Films described in this chapter include George Lucas' *Star Wars* trilogy, unorthodox Christian examples like *Dogma* (1999) and *Stigmata* (1999), reincarnation films like *On a Clear Day* (1970) and *Birth* (2004), films featuring clairvoyants and psychics, like *Powder* (1995) and *The Gift* (2000), films with themes of nature veneration like *Nell* (1994) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and a raft of films featuring angels, chiefly Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987). The plots are passed over in near-breathless haste, which renders the analysis superficial.

Chapter 3, "Sign, Symbol and Primal Fears in the Satanic Film," proceeds in a similar fashion. Satanism is set in the context of the Biblical religions, described as an aristocratic pastime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the founding of Anton La Vey's New Church of Satan in the 1960s is described. The Black Mass, conservative Christian denunciations of Satanism, and the palpable lack of physical evidence for Satanic abuse of any kind are sketched. The clutch of films that Fry labels "Satanic" are of varying quality, and grouped under a number of rubrics. These include "The Devil's Advocates," "The Antichrist in Film," "Possession and Exorcism Themes," "The Faust Story in Film," and "Crises of Belief in the Satanic Film." The films discussed are a motley bunch, from the early Satanic "cult" film *The Black Cat* (1934), through Roman Polanski's stylish *The Ninth Gate* (1999), to classic treatments such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), also by Roman Polanski, the quartet of films that commenced with Robert Donner's *The Omen* (1976), and the equally famous quartet that commenced with William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). The description of the films is occasionally insightful, and considers issues such as the portrayal of secret Satanic groups in modern culture, and the question of whether such films are "true horror films" (144), an accolade that Fry accords Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987). There is some consideration of the comic devil in films, and more general horror films, such as the *Hallowe'en* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises.

Chapter 3, "Season of the Witch," considers Wicca in film, presenting a reasonably accurate profile of the religion, then surveying witches in film from *The Crucible* (1996), the film version of Arthur Miller's celebrated play about the seventeenth century Salem witch trials to various demonic and misogynist portrayals of witches, like Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Possibly the best and most detailed section of the book is the extended discussion of Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) and George A. Romero's *Season of the Witch* (1972), two films that have been well-received

by Wiccans and Pagans, despite being able to be read as critiques of the occult (as both directors have stated). The remainder of the chapter is a tour through a series of witchcraft films, such as *The Craft* (1996), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), and *Practical Magic* (1998). Chapter 4, “‘I See dead people’: Spiritualism in Film” opens with a discussion of the Fox sisters and the emergence of Spiritualism in the 1850s, and considers a range of films that deal with ghosts who are active in the world of humans, both benevolent and malevolent. There is also a consideration of the Japanese *Ringu* films and their Hollywood adaptations, Steven Spielberg’s *Poltergeist* films, and haunted house examples like Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) and comedy spiritualist films such as *Ghostbusters* (1984).

The brief conclusion is tellingly titled “‘This rough magic I here abjure,’” quoting Prospero, the enchanter in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. This chapter examines zombie motifs in films that deal with voodoo, incubus and succubus motifs in *The Entity* (1981) and alien messiahs in the seminal early Robert Wise film *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and John Sayles’ low-budget *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984). The conclusion is perfunctory; Fry attempts to balance the enduring popularity of the occult in film and popular media with Prospero’s admission that magic should be abjured, surely a nod to the mainstream Christian excoriation of such motifs. *Cinema of the Occult* is a strange and mostly disappointing book; the content promises much but the execution is too general and descriptive to satisfy the academic reader.