

Cult Films and Religion

David Michael Brown

What interested me when attending the Eternal Sunshine of the Academic Mind symposium was the many ways that religion can be read into a film, even if that religious idea had never, in fact, been part of the director's original intention. We are not talking Cecil B. DeMille epics here, films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) are what they are; big budget 'Hollywoodised' translations to comfort the masses on a Sunday afternoon as they sip on a cup of tea. Rather, what we are talking about are the ways that viewers and filmmakers can get a different religious experience from the same script or film. Take *Superman The Movie* (1978), discussed during the symposium, as an example. Much debate ensued about the image of the Messiah, coming down from above to save us from our sins, the chosen son. However, the next audience member could easily see the film as a shallow piece of flag waving propaganda as the Stars and Stripes carrying Superhero spends time with the President of the United States. Then there are those who just see the film for what it is; a fabulous translation of a comic book. Everyone is right, it just depends on whose perspective you look at it.

It is that mix of subjectivity and relativism that makes the investigation of religion in cult films so fascinating, and as an aficionado of the low brow end of cinematic entertainment it is one that interests me considerably. Mainstream films often use religion as a subplot, not wishing to make an utterance that may result in poor box office takings, particularly in America's religious belt. Cult films, on the other hand, can push the boundaries of the way religion is depicted and often abused all in the name of salacious entertainment, and filmmakers never try to hide their opinions; what you see is what you get, and they thrive with no real money behind them. They can do what they want to do. In the Seventies, when the midnight movie was king, cult filmmakers didn't have such concerns with distribution. The 42nd Street grindhouse fleapits and drive-ins ensured that no matter what the content, these films could be shown, giving directors like Russ Meyer and John Waters scope to push boundaries even further. The horror genre, in particular, seems to delight in desecrating the altar of organised religion. Hollywood horrors have seen the church reign victorious against the evil of the devil; *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976) series in particular lured in their audiences with promises of throwing Christians to the lions but both films ended with Christianity winning in the end. The more interesting side of the horror genre is low budget fare that has to rely on cheap thrills to get their often sacrilegious point across; none more so than Guilo Berruli's *Killer Nun* (1978). The titular heroine is addicted to morphine as her life descends into lesbianism, torture and death. If you chatted to Berruli I am sure you would hear tales of a tormented childhood wracked with Catholic guilt, so what better way to get it out of the system than to make a 'nunsploitation' flick! A few years earlier British director Pete Walker followed his sordid little classics *Frightmare* (1974) and *The House of Whipcord* (1974) with *The House of Mortal Sin* aka *The Confessional Murders* (1976), "Tortured by desires his vows forbid....master of a house of mortal sin." It is obvious from his previous films that Walker has a great hatred for figures of authority; the judicial system and doctors had already felt the wrath of his directorial contempt but with *The House of Mortal Sin* he aims his sights at the British church. In the film a priest records his parishioner's confessionals and then blackmails his victims with the sordid personal demons that they have confessed to him. Anyone who declines his offer is brutally murdered using a delightful collection of religious paraphernalia including a cinematic first, death by rosary beads.

If the subtlety of the horror genre may seem too much for some then the work of two prolific figureheads of Seventies excess will quite possibly blow their minds. The films of Ken Russell and Alejandro Jodorowsky are steeped in religious iconography. Their main protagonists are wracked with guilt and driven by psychedelic nightmares that often feature bizarre dramatisations of the crucifixion. Russell's *Tommy* (1975), *Altered States* (1980) and *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988) in particular all have used this potent image from the Bible to tell their story. The obvious starting point, however, must be the director's *The Devils* (1971). This is the film where Russell's religious obsessions are not merely window dressings to help him tell his story; in *The Devils* religion is the story. Oliver Reed stars as Father Grandier, a driven

man trying to defend his town against the corrupt church who want to take over his town. The church decides to try him, as you would, as a warlock who is in command of a devil possessed nunnery. They send in a witch hunter whose allegations drive the nuns into a sexual frenzy that takes control of the whole town and soon Father Grandier dies to save the souls of his flock. The confronting scenes of naked nun orgies, burnings at the stake and a nun masturbating with the charred bones of Father Grandier ensured that the film caused controversy everywhere it was shown and has still to be released uncut anywhere in the world. I'm sure that Aldous Huxley wasn't thinking of this debauchery when he wrote the novel *The Devils of Loudon* on which Russell based his film but Russell's often sacrilegious imagery has ensured that the controversial film will be remembered for many years to come.

However, even Ken Russell would step back and take a bow to the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky. An associate of Juan Lopez whose work was discussed at the symposium, Jodorowsky is presently in something of a renaissance, his films were recently shown retrospectively at the Cannes Film Festival. The Mexican maestro's films are a deeply religious experience for many viewers as much as they were for the man himself. Often adding writing, producing and acting duties to his resume he is best known for a trio of films that defy description. *El Topo* (1970), *The Holy Mountain* (1973) and *Santa Sangre* (1989) all depict loners put in extraordinary situations trying to deal with corrupt religious extremists and their own internal demons. The poster tagline for *El Topo* perfectly sums up the weird and wonderful world of the Tarot card obsessed Jodorowsky. "See the naked young Franciscans whipped with cactus. See the bandit leader disembowelled. See the priest ride into the sunset with a midget and her newborn baby. What it all means isn't exactly clear, but you won't forget it." His masterpiece, a film that pushes sacrilegious imagery to its limits, is *The Holy Mountain*. The film tells of the quest for immortality by a band of nine men, seven of whom represent the planets of the solar system. They set out on an epic journey to find the Holy Mountain of the film's title and discover the secret of eternal life. This simplistic plot summary barely scratches the surface, often described as the one film that perfectly replicates the experience of taking LSD. The director went without sleep for weeks before the shoot to ensure that he was in the right frazzled state of mind to totally immerse himself into the role of the alchemist. For Jodorowsky the spiritual experience of the shoot is as important as the final product and the religious beliefs of the director have moulded some extraordinary films that, alas, very few people have seen.

The cult status of a film does not necessarily mean that the film did not manage to get viewers on cinema seats. As covered in the symposium, *Star Wars* (1977), one of the biggest box office hits of all time and a genuine modern day phenomenon, has created a huge cult that has become bigger than the mainstream. Many claim that *Star Wars*, arguably the world's largest cult film, killed quality cinema for the masses. However, with fans returning the cinema again and again, often dressed in costume, this obsessive behaviour revolves around the religious experience of attending the cinema. The actual physical experience of witnessing a movie with a large amount of people in a darkened cinema can be seen as similar to the gathering of the masses to pray, only here it is at the cinematic altar. The religious fervour that greets some films and their stars verges on hysterical. No film more so than Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). The story of a Transylvanian transvestite scientist determined to create the ultimate man is a musical pastiche on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The congregation often dressed as the cross dressing Dr Frankenfurter, his hunchbacked assistant Riff Raff, or the clean cut heroes of the film Brad and Janet, and re-enact moments of the film whilst they are watching. When on screen it rains, the audience puts up umbrellas, when someone cries, the audience squirts water in their eyes, when someone says lets make a toast, the audience throw toast at the screen. A holy communion to the converted? Maybe, but it is possibly the ultimate reaction that any filmmaker could want from their audience; the moment when, in a fit of religious frenzy, the audience becomes one with what's happening on screen. This kind of interaction just doesn't happen in mainstream cinema. The fact that cult films often allow the audience to witness the strange and the bizarre means that like minded viewers bond over their love of a particular film, actor or director. They bring people together, like participating in a religious group. Whether devotees of cult movies or followers of the latest in-vogue religious cult, the world of movies and religion will be forever entwined.