

Witchfinder General

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Many horror scholars and fans know the Devil's Advocates series as the more feisty step-cousin of BFI Classics; similar in format and tone, but more prone to bar fights. The series offers slim monographs on individual horror films, written by scholars, critics, and fans, which attempt to situate the film within the history of the horror genre. Ian Cooper's entry carries on the tradition, offering an outstanding entry point for scholars and viewers new to Michael Reeves' 1968 film *Witchfinder General*, as well as information that will increase the appreciation of long-time fans.

After a brief introduction, the monograph is divided into four major sections. Chapter one, 'The Place of the Film', focuses primarily on the short career of director Michael Reeves, including his works prior to *Witchfinder* and his most pertinent influences (especially Don Siegal and Roger Corman). This chapter serves primarily as an extended introduction, as these connections will be explored in greater detail further on in the book.

Chapter two, 'Context, Production, and Reception', is the longest and most wide-ranging chapter of the book, providing a wealth of background information on *Witchfinder*. It starts with

a brief overview of Matthew Hopkins, the historical figure on whom the titular character is based. A brief overview of the source novel gives way to a few short sections on the companies behind the film, mainly Tigon and American International Pictures. More insightful is the section on *Witchfinder*'s relationship to British genre film. Cooper remarks: 'Although horror would, in time, become a key part of British film culture, it took awhile' (28). Cooper places *Witchfinder* in the context of the Hammer films of the 50s and 60s, noting that Hammer's early output was initially shocking, but the studio's impact had somewhat dulled by *Witchfinder*'s release. While critics were initially 'revolted and outraged' (quoting Nina Hibbin's review of Hammer's *Dracula* from *The Daily Worker*) by Hammer's films, the following decade saw 'a kind of familiarity, even coziness', setting into Hammer's output (32). *Witchfinder* provided a different kind of horror for critics and fans who had become accustomed to Hammer's style and content. As Cooper summarizes, 'Reeves and Baker's script substitutes a palpable moral horror and a scathing depiction of inhumanity for the more familiar Manichean morality and reassuring climactic restoration of order' (34). While Hammer films might have trafficked in all kinds of blood and cruelty, at the end of the day they still saw a bright line separating good from evil, with society on the side of good. *Witchfinder*, in Cooper's reading, offers no such comfort. Cooper will return to this theme throughout his monograph. In further contrasting *Witchfinder* with the Hammer films of the 60s, Cooper argues that *Witchfinder* 'reflects the political upheaval of this turbulent decade', in ways that the Hammer films were reluctant to engage (42-6). In particular, Cooper finds the film's 'association of sexuality with rape, brutality, coercion and torture' to be a 'sour comment' on the culture's relationship to sexuality (45). The censors and critics seemed to focus on the film's brutality, while lacking the ability to identify its cultural relevance. The British censorship board demanded changes after reviewing the script, and further

cut the finished film. Cooper provides a helpful list of scenes from which footage was removed (50) and attempts to separate these scenes, which Reeves intended as part of the film, from footage that was added to European releases to include some gratuitous nudity, which Reeves merely ‘tolerated’ as necessary for the market (51). For Cooper, this makes ‘talk of a “complete version”’ of *Witchfinder* ‘problematic’ (51). Cooper notes a few critics who admired *Witchfinder* for its cinematography and the performance of Vincent Price, but spends most of the section describing critics who were repelled by the film’s violence. Alan Bennet, for example, contrasts *Witchfinder* with the ‘belly laughs’ that are usually found in horror films (52), an attack which caused Reeves to respond publicly (53). Cooper ends this section here, deferring a more thorough examination of the film’s violence to the following chapter.

Chapter 3, ‘Analysis’, is where Cooper draws many of these themes together. This chapter offers a close reading of selected scenes from the film and makes Cooper’s strongest case for *Witchfinder* as an important film, even if a rather unpleasant one. In addition to *Witchfinder*’s participation in the horror genre, Cooper argues for connections with the Western, particularly in the film’s use of landscape and the way that this landscape underscores the story of revenge. With this generic designation, Cooper explores the similarities between *Witchfinder* and another ‘English Western’, Samuel Peckinpah’s notorious *Straw Dogs* (1971). In both films, ‘violence is not something that can be shut out or avoided but a deep-seated self-destructive drive’ (69). Cooper finds in both films, and in the personal lives of both directors, a certain ambivalence towards violence: ‘It’s possible’, Cooper suggests, ‘even likely, that both Peckinpah and Reeves were, for all their talk of catharsis, fascinated with violence and carnage and took a certain pleasure in portraying it (in much the same way as many viewers take pleasure in watching it)’ (76). This insightful discussion points towards one of the features that has made

Witchfinder so continually upsetting and compelling: its violence is ugly, rather than redemptive, and it is not always easy to tell exactly where the film's moral centre lies. While it feels comforting to say that *Witchfinder* means to use its excessive cruelty to reveal the cruelty at the heart of humanity, it is not clear that the film's intentions are always so noble.

In the fourth and final chapter, Cooper attempts to place *Witchfinder* within the history of the horror genre. He argues that *Witchfinder*'s influence is observed most clearly in the low-budget American horror films of the 1970s that Robin Wood has identified as 'counter-cultural' (in Wood's seminal 1979 essay 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film'), such as Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1971) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973). What these films have in common with *Witchfinder* is a refusal to view violence as a deviation from the norm, but rather as an intrinsic human behaviour that is reinforced by our societal structures of power and dominance. Whether it erupts within the church or the family, the violence depicted in these films is only the logical conclusion of the violence at the core of our institutions. Like many of these films, the cruelty on display in *Witchfinder* reveals something deeply unsettling about the culture in which we live in, as well as ourselves.