

## On Screen

### Films & DVDs

#### Lords Of Chaos

Jonas Åkerlund (Director)

Arrow Films 2018, 118 mins

Jonas Åkerlund's *Lords Of Chaos* tells a fictionalised version of the rise of Norwegian black metal in the early 1990s, focusing on the bands Mayhem and Burzum. There's lots of material to work with. For those who don't know: Mayhem's vocalist Per 'Dead' Ohlin killed himself before they ever released any material; Kristian 'Varg' Vikernes (Mayhem's bassist and the man behind Burzum) burned down at least three ancient Norwegian churches and eventually murdered Mayhem's founding guitarist Øystein 'Euronymous' Aarseth. Another member of this small circle of friends, Bard 'Faust' Eithun, murdered a man named Magne Andreassen.

Were it not for the murders and arsons, *Lords Of Chaos* could almost have been a farce in the spirit of Chris Morris's *Four Lions*, depicting the radicalisation, rooted in a desperate desire to be 'evil', of a bunch of teenage idiots. And at times, Åkerlund (a Swede) does seem to be ridiculing his subjects. Early on, Aarseth's little sister comes down to the basement to tell him that his band sucks. Mothers

are a running gag: Vikernes borrows the money to make his first album from his, and Eithun's calls out, "Honey, who is it?" from the next room when the police arrive to arrest him for Andreassen's murder.

Aarseth and Vikernes are played by Rory Culkin and Emory Cohen, respectively. (When the film premiered, Vikernes referred to Cohen in one of his interminable YouTube videos as "a fat Jewish actor", adding "I'm Scandinavian, by the way". He concluded by saying, "Character [assassination] is a common weapon used by people who don't like Europeans.") Culkin is the only cast member who even attempts a Norwegian accent, and it's in and out.

In a depressing scene, the pair's pretensions are deflated by a young woman played by pop singer Sky Ferreira. Smirking, she tells Aarseth that Venom weren't real Satanists – that they admitted as much, that it was all showbiz. The guitarist flops sulkily onto his couch, at which point Vikernes angrily demands that she take her clothes off. She's shown them up, and now she must be punished. Making a sour face, she complies.

This scene is one of a few in which *Lords Of Chaos* reveals commonalities

with the recent Mötley Crüe biopic *The Dirt*. Both films open with sneering voiceover narration and stock footage to set the scene – early 80s America in *The Dirt*, early 90s Norway in *Lords Of Chaos* – contrasting happy normal people with the fire and fury of heavy metal. And both treat women as objects – Ferreira's the only woman in *Lords Of Chaos* with an actual storyline, and her character was invented for the film. All the others are naked groupies, of which there are a surprising number, all desperate to sleep with Vikernes, who's otherwise portrayed as a fat, rageaholic loser hanging Nazi flags in his room and posing before the mirror with knives.

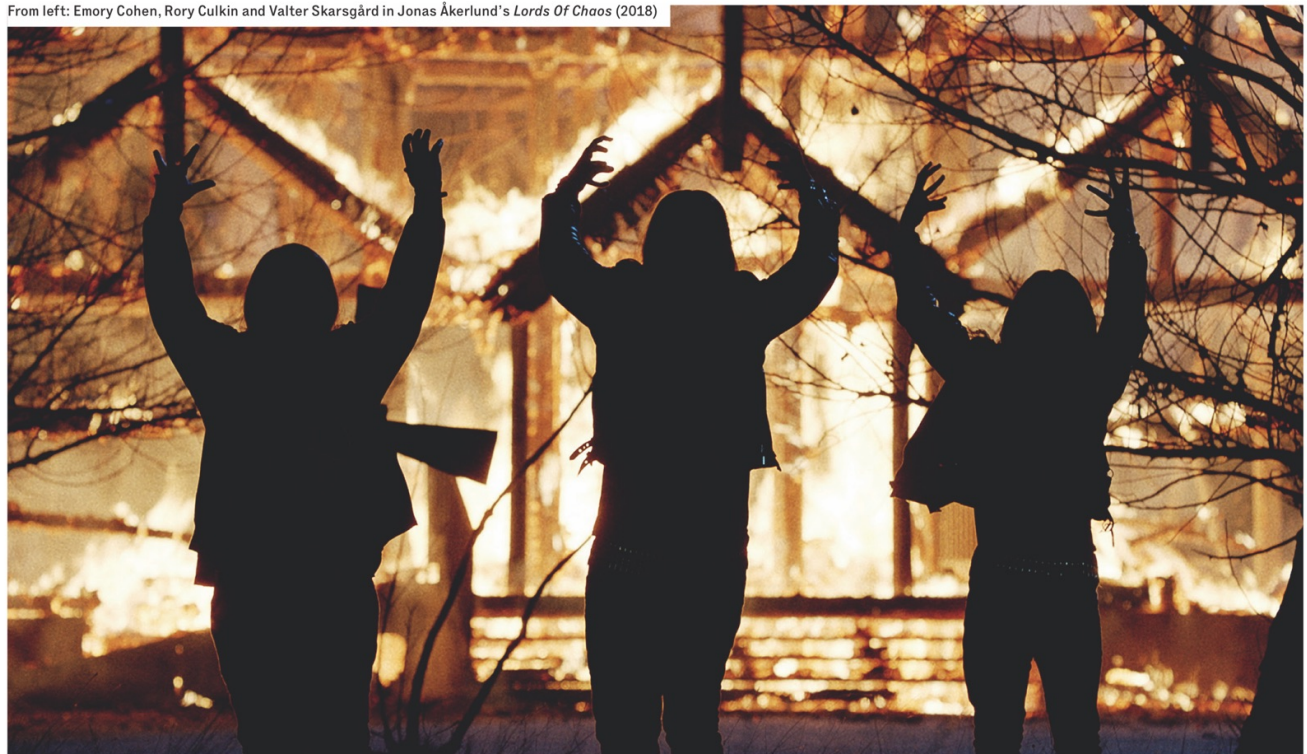
The two films differ in their relationship to their source material, though. *The Dirt* almost feels like an attempt to whitewash the vile version of themselves Mötley Crüe and their ghostwriter Neil Strauss described; its debauchery is strictly R-rated, while an accurate depiction of the events described in the book would be kicked off Pornhub. *Lords Of Chaos*, meanwhile, shares little beyond its title with the book by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind. Moynihan has some worrisome fixations, and seems deeply

invested in being "provocative" or "transgressive" in a very lonely guy at the power electronics show sort of way, but his not-quite-fascism doesn't seep into the film the way it did the book.

It must be acknowledged that Åkerlund treats the murders of Andreassen and Aarseth with appropriate seriousness. They're lengthy and gruesome, and the victims cry and beg for mercy in ways that take away any vicarious thrills that a horror film would offer. He doesn't maintain that same distance during the church-burning scenes, though; the flames burst forth beautifully, licking at the camera lens and illuminating the young men's thrilled faces. He films these acts of destruction with the same energy as the scenes of Mayhem performing live or cranking out tunes in a recording studio. And it's this ambivalence, and willingness to wallow in a toxic boys' club worldview rather than interrogating it, that ultimately makes *Lords Of Chaos* a confused mishmash of a film. Åkerlund may have wanted to make Aarseth, Vikernes, Eithun and their friends cooler than they were, but the facts just kept getting in the way of the story.

Phil Freeman

From left: Emory Cohen, Rory Culkin and Valter Skarsgård in Jonas Åkerlund's *Lords Of Chaos* (2018)



Arrow Films