

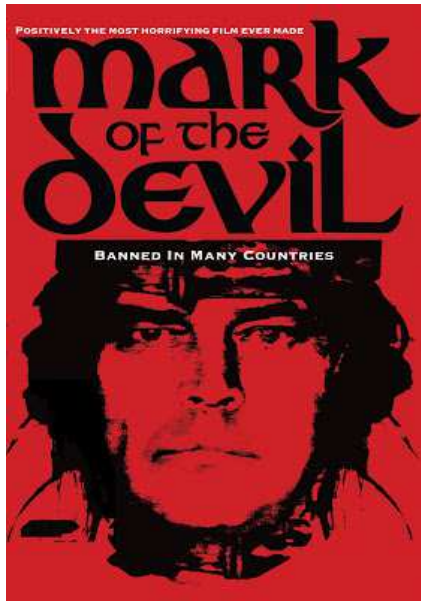
Indie Horror Films

All genres of suspense, terror, and horror will be reviewed by Richard Gary. His address to send preview copies supplied upon request to rbf55@msn.com.

Thursday, December 20, 2012

DVD Review: Mark of the Devil

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Mark of the Devil: Yack Pack
Directed by Michael Armstrong
Cheezy Flicks Entertainment
96 minutes, 1970 / 2006 / 2012
Cheezyflicks.com
MVDvisual.com

This German film, originally known as *Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält*, is a classic in early torture porn. Obviously modeled after the increasingly sexualized Hammer Films of the time, it incorporated the ethos of the graphic violence of likes of Hershell Gordon Lewis.

Taking place in some European country - supposedly England, I believe, considering one of the characters played by Herbert Lom (d. 2012), is named Lord Chamberlain - it takes place around the 17th Century, a time of witch hunters (a role both Vincent Price and Peter Cushing played for Hammer).



Reggie Nalder

The small town that is the focal point of the film is under the thumb of the despotic local hunter, who uses his power to get what he wants, be it money, power, or sex. He needs to keep this control because he is one ugly dude. Named Albino, which strangely he is not, he has a face that was ravaged by fire (in real life) channeled by the underrated Reggie Nalder, (d. 1991), who made a career playing the heavy.

While Albino is supposed to follow Church law and have indictments and trials before the torture and executions, he just takes what he wants, and then burns anyone who he wants out of the way in an auto da fe (look it up). But his power comes under scrutiny with the arrival of said Lord Chamberlain, the governing Church-appointed witch hunter, as well as his student and an underling (who has as much morals as Albino).

The student and hero of the piece, Christian (of course), is played by now-cult actor, Udo Kier, who would rise to fame just a few short years later as the star of such classics of bad cinema, Andy Warhol's *Frankenstein* (1973) and *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974). He looks much younger in this film;

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he was quite handsome in the two latter releases, but his blue eyes and baby face are stunningly handsome. I'm not attracted, I'm jealous.



Olivera Katarina

Catching the fancy of Albino and Christian is Vanessa, played by the very heavingly-buxomed, and actually not as pretty as Kier, the Serbian actor Olivera Katarina (last name credited as Vuco here). When Albino can't have her, she's declared a witch, and love-interest Christian is out to save her.



Udo Kier

The secondary plot, which has some historical truth to it from what I remember, is that the Church gave the landed gentry who opposed the high taxes or balked at oppressive religious laws a choice: turn over their money and land to the Church, or be tortured and condemned to be killed and the Church would get their holdings anyway. That is Chamberlain's purpose, apparently, which is a turn because at first you are led to believe that he is a savior, rather than an every worse criminal than what we are introduced to in the beginning. Whether he is out for himself or as a direct edict from the Vatican is something unexplained). This is also part of why the US Constitution has a separation of Church and State (the first government to ever do so).

It is sort of like the 1975 James Clavell novel *Shogun*, where the reader is introduced to the local government which has power of life and death, and then as you work your way through the society with the main occidental character, you find that they were just minuscule in reality to the larger hierarchy. The Church of those times was like that, with those in charge with absolute power (i.e., as Lord John Acton correctly posited in 1887, "...absolute power corrupts absolutely), and yet there were those more powerful above them.

I believe that while this is true, it is especially accurate when embodied by a religious order, who can justify it in their own minds as God makes right. The nastiest person I ever met was a born-again Christian who firmly believe that God wanted her to have what she wanted by any means necessary, even if it meant stabbing co-workers she didn't like in the back (as she tried and failed with me; I guess God wanted her so bad, He had her join Him in her mid-20s via cancer – note that I believe if there is a God, there is no gender involved, so I'm just using her terminology). The Judeo-Christian West believes that Muslims are alone in their "God is Great" jihads, but Christianity (and Judaism in pre-Roman times) was just as fierce and cruel. There is a lot of injustice in the Bible, for example. Comedian Jackie Mason once stated that according to the Bible, the punishment is the same for adultery and eating non-Kosher food, to which he quipped, "I tried them both and don't see the comparison."

There is plenty of torture laid out for the viewer here (which is shown in the trailer, and why it is not included, as I don't want this to be an "adult" site), including tar and feathering, burning at the stake, various mechanisms designed purely for cruelty (e.g., the thumbscrew), and in the most infamous scene, the removal of a tongue by pincers. The thing rarely talked about is that every one of the implements used is based on reality. The whole Church R&D team of that era was focused on finding ways to help the sinner confess and find God through the most gruesome means. Many are shown here. In college, I did a paper on the Spanish Inquisition, which no one unexpected, and many of the tools shown here are mentioned in detail in books about the period.



And with all this going on, there is an incredulous sappy love story that happens with gooey and tinny music played over and over as a lover's theme, in typical European films of the time.

This is an absolute benchmark for what would become a genre that includes the likes of *Ilsa*, *She Wolf of the SS* (1975), *Thriller – A Cruel Picture* (1973), the whole Italian giallo (e.g., the zombie films by Fulci, and demon ones by Lamberto Bava), the abovementioned Warhol pix, and even continuing to today with the likes of the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises, and *A Serbian Film* (2010). If you enjoy the genre, then this is a must for you.

There is one complaint I do have, and that's more about the company that puts this out. Don't get me wrong, *Cheezy Flicks Entertainment* re-releases some amazing period exploitative films, and I have never been sorry to see anything they've released. I mean, even this one actually has a replica vomit bag that was distributed when it was first released (kudos to Cheezy). However, I often find that my player had trouble reading the discs, and it tends to skip, much as it does with DVD-R recordings. I'm not sure if they're going the cheap route or what, but it is annoying to have to keep going back to see the parts that were skipped, or to get the digital noise and stalling as the player tries to make sense of it all.

There are some cool extras here, including some retro-trailers and intermission ads that are on many of the Cheezy releases.

Posted by Robert Barry Francos at 2:51 PM

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