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## Mark of the Devil (1970)

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Written by: [Michael Armstrong and Adrian Hoven](#)  
 Directed by: [Michael Armstrong, Adrian Hoven \(uncredited\)](#)  
 Starring: [Herbert Lom, Udo Kier and Olivera Katarina](#)

Reviewed by: [Brett Gallman](#)

*"We must never weaken in performing God's work. For those who turn against our Saviour, no punishment is sufficient."*

Reputations can be a tricky thing—they're often deserved, but, sometimes, they can betray a film as well. In the annals of horror, few films are as infamous as **Mark of the Devil**. Marketed as the first film to be rated "V for Violence" and "positively the most horrifying film ever made," the West German import also arrived in theaters with barf bags for weak-stomached audiences. Make no mistake: the film deserves its infamy in this regard, as it's violent, gross, and squirm-inducing. However, such a surface level consideration of the film's gratuitous elements belies the legitimately disturbing kernel buried in the black heart of **Mark of the Devil**, a film that reveals the evil that men do when blessed with conviction and societal approval.

In 18th century Austria, a shit-kicking witch-hunter (Reggie Nalder) rules his local jurisdiction with a hateful, iron fist. Anyone he deems a witch is tried as one and then executed, and any local girl that catches his eye is likely to be imprisoned, tortured, and raped beforehand. And the most horrifying for this town is that he isn't even the grand inquisitor; that would be Lord Cumberland (Herbert Lom), a witch-hunter with the approval of the crown who's coming to take over. Cumberland proves to be every bit as ruthless as his predecessor, and his behavior is so alarming that his apprentice (Udo Kier), a local gentleman, eventually rebels against his master after falling in love with a girl (Olivera Katarina) who is wrongly sentenced to the stake.



The rise of both communism and fascism in the 20th century resulted in a renewed interest in the horrors of witch-hunting, which were revisited and reconfigured into an allegory by Arthur Miller's **The Crucible** with **the advent** of the Red Scare in the 50s. While the movies were in lock-step after spitting out sci-fi parables like **The Thing from Another World** and **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**, it took a while until witch-hunting in particular was explored. 1968's **Witchfinder General**, an unusually violent and inelegant offering from AIP, is the most noteworthy film that kicked off this brief cycle. **Mark of the Devil** landed squarely in the middle of it and was actually conceived to truck on the popularity of the Vincent **Price vehicle**; most of the time, such an approach just

results in a half-baked, half-hearted cash-in that carries over the gratuitous violence and little else, but **Mark of the Devil** is every bit as good as the film that inspired it, if not better.

It's undeniably more accomplished when it comes to filling the gore quotient; while **Witchfinder General** is violent and brutal, **Mark of the Devil** ups the ante considerably. One of the forefathers of torture porn, the film's German title can



literally be translated as **Witches Are Tortured to Death**, which lays it all out on the flogging table, as it were. Criticizing the film for not living up to that title is impossible, as the "witches" here endure heinous savagery at the hands of Lom and Nalder's persecutions. The film's **signature** and most unforgettable image involves the forcible removal of a girl's tongue, but that's just one of many unsettling mutilations. Confessions are squeezed out via various torture racks and other brutal implements, and the camera rarely flinches from the mangled, twisted flesh that's well-realized by top-notch gore effects. Though the 60s had its fair share of explicit gore and violence, the 70s would revel in cinematic brutality, and **Mark of the Devil** was one of the first torch-bearers.



On the subject of "witchcraft," it has little to offer beyond what we already know. Its scenarios are of the typical maddening sort that finds victims unjustly targeted and placed in impossible scenarios where their guilt is presumed regardless of any evidence (or lack thereof). Religious hypocrisy is at the center, of course, as both Cumberland and Albino are men of God, so their punishments are supposedly met with divine approval. Like many films of this ilk, **Mark of the Devil** is unrelentingly nihilistic and presents a less-than-stellar portrait of humanity that's in line with a tumultuous time period. Its German origins are also noteworthy since such nihilism is often symptomatic of the country's horror output--I've postulated in the past that it may be some repressed Nazi guilt,

and that stuff would have been much less repressed in 1970, when the country is only 25 years removed from the Holocaust. Germany also had an unusual fate during the Cold War since it rested on one of its biggest fault lines, so it's no wonder **Mark of the Devil** would be birthed out of such turmoil. It's also appropriate since a German text inspired the first film of this type, **Haxan**, all the way back in the 20s, thus bringing the whole thing full circle.

**Mark of the Devil** isn't without its faults--it's a little unfocused and quite episodic, as the witch hunters basically bounce from one set of suspects to the next, with Kier's growing distrust and awareness serving as the narrative backbone. Each scenario is more absurd than the last, though, which gives the film a nice sense of escalation and provides a logical progression. Once the inquisitors target a family for putting on puppet shows under the suspicion that they've used witchcraft to imbibe their puppets with human life, the scene has been thoroughly flayed to its ludicrous bones. The drama underpinning it all works rather well; Lom would appear to be slumming it giving his impressive resume, but the recently deceased actor constantly shifted between high and low projects, and this one falls somewhere in between. He brings a necessary austerity to the role of Cumberland that reveals the most disturbing aspect of these hunts: these unspeakable deeds were committed by learned, respected men who instituted them to keep the locals in constant fear and paranoia. Cumberland isn't realized with

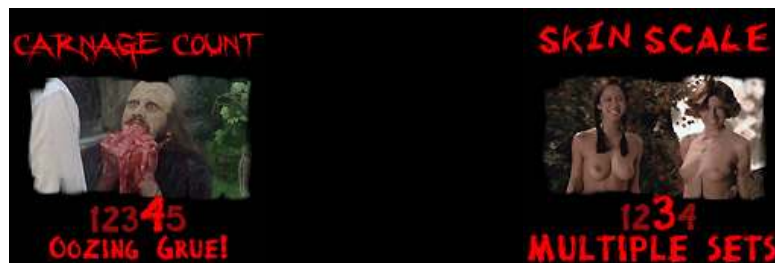


an over-the-top, knowingly despicable performance, but by a calm, measured one that presents a man driven by conviction. In contrast, Nalder's Albino is a more weaselly, nauseating performance that illustrates the difference between the two men, who are still essentially the same at their core.



Caught in between is Kier in a rare role as a sort-of good guy; his career would eventually be defined by creeper roles (and he was only a few short years away from delivering some of the most whacked out portrayals of Dracula and Frankenstein), but this early turn presents him as a boyish leading man.

Somewhat ironically, Katarina is the most bewitching female presence in the film, a fiery, raven-haired beauty who becomes the film's focal point. Director Armstrong is quite serious about focusing on these characters as well; in fact, most of the film's signature violence isn't glimpsed until at least thirty or forty minutes. **Mark of the Devil** is also nicely crafted, as Ernst Kalinke's cinematography captures the dreary, uninviting Austrian locales, and Michael Holm's score contains one of the most unexpectedly beautiful main themes in any horror film. Still, there's enough grindhouse grunge and sleaze on **Mark of the Devil** that allows it to remain genuinely disturbing even forty years after its release. It was eventually banned in several countries, but modern audiences don't have to worry about that, as the film has seen a couple of DVD releases; Blue Underground's is still in print and quite nice since it boasts an uncut version of the film with a solid presentation. A wealth of extras are also included, including interviews with Kier, Herbert Fux, Gaby Fuchs, Inenborg Shoner, a theatrical trailer, radio spots, still galleries, and a commentary with Armstrong. Hunt it down, as **Mark of the Devil** lives up to its reputation and then some. **Buy it!**



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