

The Devils (1971), directed by Ken Russell
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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Cinematography--David Watkin; screenplay--Ken Russell, set design--Derek Jarman; music--Peter Maxwell-Davies and David Munrow

Oliver Reed--Father Urbain Grandier
Vanessa Redgrave--Sister Jeanne
Dudley Sutton--Baron de Laubardemont
Gemma Jones--Madelaine
Murray Melvin--Mignon
Michael Gothard--Father Barre
Georgina Hale--Phillippe

Like many other historical films (for example, *The Return of Martin Guerre*), *The Devils* is based on actual events. Knowing this, what are your expectations about the forms and the tone the film will assume? How does the juxtaposition of the notice at the beginning of the film with the opening theatrical sequence influence your thinking about the film?

At the end of this first scene, Cardinal Richelieu salutes the “birth of a new France, where church and state are one.” He and King Louis XIII shake hands and pledge that “the Protestants be driven from the land.” Immediately, there is a “shock cut,” (an abrupt, jarring edit) to the maggot-riddled skull of a skeleton, the victim of a particularly gruesome punishment for Protestants. What do these images tell us about Richelieu’s and the king’s plan?

In the third scene, we meet Father Urbain Grandier. He is speaking at the funeral of the Governor of Loudon, who has died of plague. Notice the set for the city of Loudon. How would you characterize it? Does it seem “realistic” for the time and place?

What colors predominate in the film? Which colors are associated with which characters?

What sort of a man is Grandier as the film opens? His first speech establishes his point of view as contrary to that of Richelieu (“The religious wars are over. Catholics no longer fight with Protestants. We have survived”). Knowing what we know after the first scene, his speech may seem naive. The procession over which he presides in this scene will be grotesquely mimicked toward the end of

the film. Over the course of the film, we see different facets of his character. Does he develop and change? How are those changes indicated? Several scenes are set in his apartment. How would you characterize it? Does it “fit” with the set for Loudon? How are the connections between Grandier and Loudon developed?

Compare Father Grandier with Sister Jeanne, the prioress of the Ursuline convent. For example, her physical deformity is contrasted with Grandier’s good looks and vanity. How is Grandier’s vanity depicted? His spirituality? Saintliness? Sister Jeanne’s faith? What role do Sister Jeanne’s fantasies play in the film? How is her “development” (or disintegration) as a character linked to Grandier’s, literally and visually? How would you characterize her relationship with the other nuns in the convent?

The plague plays an important role in the film, and forms a hellish backdrop for several key scenes. How do characters react to the plague? How does the fact of the plague influence various characters? Grandier and Madelaine, who form the only truly tender relationship in the film, meet and fall in love in scenes where the ravages of the plague are starkly in evidence. How might these scenes foreshadow the final scenes of the film?

How would you characterize the music and sound effects for the film? As aural elements, what do they add to our understanding of the scenes they underscore? For example, when Sister Jeanne enters the anteroom with bars that opens out onto the street, from which she can gaze at Grandier, the music changes, signaling an emotional shift which culminates in her first fantasy about Grandier.

The central characters are triangulated in various ways, within the movement of the film as a whole and in specific scenes. Grandier, Barre and de Laubardemont (Richelieu’s henchman) struggle for power while Sister Jeanne, Phillippe and Madelaine gain or desire Grandier’s attention. In the scene over the mass grave, Mignon’s banal comments signal his insensitivity to the horror while Grandier and Madelaine gaze at each other across the abyss. What other instances of these triangulated characters can you point to?

How would you characterize Father Barre? In many ways, his character is the most anachronistic—he is as “modern” looking as the sets of Loudon. What pop 60s icon(s) does he resemble? Why do you think Russell chose to depict him in this way?

Discuss the roles theatrical elements, e.g. performances, disguises, costumes and masks, play in the film.

How is Cardinal Richelieu characterized? Pay particular attention in your discussion to the scene in his office. What does the set design convey about him? What is conveyed in the way he interacts with those around him? Look at the cross on the doors of his office. Where else in the film does the red cross show up?

In the middle of the film, there is a crucial set of scenes which are intercut. We see a little of one scene and then cut to another scene, and continue back and forth like this for several minutes. After de Laubardemont first attempts to demolish the walls, and Grandier and Madelaine have managed to rally the townspeople to prevent it, Grandier delivers a speech on the importance of keeping the walls intact, while Richelieu explains to a barely attendant king why Loudon's walls should come down. Meanwhile, the king is shooting his gun, and only at the end of the sequence is the object of his target practice revealed: a Protestant, dressed as a blackbird, who's being killed for sport.

How is King Louis XIII characterized? What do the scenes in which he appears prominently, tell us about him? Consider the opening scene, the "blackbird" scene, and the scene in which he arrives at the "orgy" in disguise.

What do you make of the final scene in the film?

What are your overall impressions of the film? Russell hasn't attempted to give us a historically accurate account, even though it is based on true events. His deliberately stylized approach, coupled with the "modern" aspects of the film (set design, music, certain dialogue) indicate that he is, perhaps, equally interested in using this historical event to shed light on dilemmas of the 70s. What do you think Russell wants to say about contemporary society?

Bibliography:

Atkins, Thomas. *Ken Russell*. NY: Monarch Press, 1976.

Hanke, Ken. *Ken Russell's Films*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984.