

To the Devil, a

The UK Film Council has already invited straight Horror and Supernatural Horror 25 WOL pitches,

Occult literally means 'hidden' so all Horror could be described as occult in the sense that all Horror deals with things that are suppressed, repressed, traditionally denied or habitually ignored. The Occult Horror sub-genre, however, specifically deals with the esoteric and magickal (as differentiated from the magic of Paul Daniels) that exists outside the exoteric realm of mainstream religion. Occult Horror is almost always 'supernatural' or 'marvellous' in Todorov's terminology; that is to say there are 'irrational' elements that are, though inexplicable, accepted as 'real' within the context of the narrative.

While Possession Horror is often the preserve of the exoteric 'crisis of faith' narrative and Supernatural Horror dwells in the lair of pre-monotheistic animism, Occult Horror explores the mystic, the arcane, the pagan and the satanic. In the same way that Supernatural Horror appeals to that part of us that cannot, or will not, accept death, Occult Horror speaks directly to the part that cannot comprehend how as great a being as man simply cannot control his own destiny, let alone his environment.

In order to understand the occult - and to create resonant occult narratives - it is

important to have a brief understanding of its historical origins. In earlier days when the Church loudly proclaimed that only the ordained priest could talk to 'higher' powers, the occultist insisted that man could communicate directly with these non-human forces. So the history of the occult is bound up with the history of religious dissent, heresy, the evolution of science and the birth of the secular.

Many occult narratives are inherently reactionary for, depending on the nature of their climax, they can suggest that those who gain spiritual power through any channel other than that sanctioned by the Church are either virgin-sacrificing monsters, nymphomaniac madwomen or flawed geniuses who want to usurp God's place as master of the universe.

This long-standing tension between the exoteric Church-sanctioned route to God and the esoteric, pagan, occult and non-sanctioned paths leads to an important element: theme. Occult Horror is a terrific genre in which to address the core philosophical ideas of free will versus fate, power versus obeisance, mastery versus subservience, man as god versus man in thrall to God and man's relationship with nature. It's the ideal place in which to state deep, moral convictions about good and evil,

religion and man's place in the moral universe.

Is your Occult Horror going to be left-hand path (advocating personal gain at the expense of others) or right-hand path (advocating personal well-being and the well-being of others)? Or are you pitting one against the other (as in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Devil Rides Out*)? Are you arguing that magick is always evil and satanic (that is, you banned *Harry Potter* toys in your house), or that it is life-affirming and soul-enhancing (that is, you drag your children to a hilltop every year to watch the sun rise on the Spring Equinox), or that it is all a risible fantasy (that is, you think that a Ouija board can be an entertaining game for a nine-year-old's birthday party)?

England has a great occult tradition, from the pagan pre-Christian landscape, through the Elizabethan alchemy of Dee and Kelly and the Thelema of Aleister Crowley ('Do what thou wilt is the whole of the Law') to Derren Brown's own idiosyncratic brand of post-modern occultism. There is tradition, too, in literature from the great pagan epics, through Shakespeare and Marlowe to the prolific occult novelist Dennis Wheatley and on to James Herbert and unarguably the greatest living occult writer, Clive Barker. You could also look at the work of Nigel Kneale, Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman and at Susanna Clarke's recent magickal doorstep novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*.

The charismatic Crowley is not only the indirect inspiration for almost every fictional magus since 1900, he is also the admitted basis for a slew of characters in occult fiction, from W Somerset Maugham's *The Magician* and M R James' short story *Casting the Runes*, to multiple characters in the works of Wheatley. This is because Occult Horror often centres on the character of the Magus or Witch, a character who gains other-worldly powers through invocation, ritual and sacrifice.

There are two key, though by no means all-inclusive, types of narrative centring on the occultist character. In the first type, the occultist is the protagonist. This type often includes the following key beats: Will to Power - Temptation - Rejection of Power - Set-back - Invocation - Power - Hubris - Ramifications - Redemption (Drama) or Damnation (Tragedy).



I'm suing my plastic surgeon.

Exorcist: The Beginning, Warner Bros.

screenplay

but Horror's hot so next up is Occult Horror.

This is a perennial story, reflected in Western culture by everything from the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness (being God made flesh, Jesus only experienced the Temptation part) to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but most perfectly by the story of Faust.

Faust sells his soul to Mephistopheles in exchange for youth but isn't quite so keen to keep his end of the bargain when Mephistopheles comes calling. This is an archetypal core narrative that informs films as diverse as the German expressionistic masterpiece *Faust* (F W Murnau 1926) and the Hollywood teen masterpiece *The Craft*. This story-type also has much in common with the Mad Scientist Horror sub-genre; films like *Hollow Man* play out a similar narrative with science replacing the occult as the means by which the central character gains and wields his unearthly powers.

A sub-strand of this type is the Slasher-Occult hybrid in which an ensemble of characters dabbles in the occult, invoke or uncover something nasty and are picked off one-by-one and includes *The Blair Witch Project* and *Long Time Dead*.

In the second key type, the occultist is the antagonist. In one of the favoured sub-strands a hero (knight) has to rescue a virgin (maid) from the evil clutches of a crazed occultist (dragon). This type often includes the following key beats: Discovery - Journey - First Encounter - Set-back - Second Encounter - Revelation - Battle - Rescue ('Comic' or Dramatic ending) or Death (Tragedy) and informs everything from *To The Devil A Daughter* to *The Wicker Man* (and, for that matter, *Dracula*).

Occult Horror and Possession Horror overlap across this story type, most notably demonstrated by *The Exorcist* and *End of Days*, both of which substitute 'The Devil' as antagonist and have Redemptive endings in which the 'virgin' (Linda Blair's Regan and Robin Tunney's Christine respectively) is saved through the self-sacrifice of the faith-regenerated protagonist (Jason Miller's Father Karras and Schwarzenegger's Jericho Cane).

Note how *The Tempest* (take a look at Derek Jarman's superb 1979 film) uses both story types; not only must Ferdinand save Miranda

from the clutches of Prospero and Caliban (Thriller), but Prospero himself must "abjure" his "rough magic" in order to re-join humanity (Redemption Drama) and, more importantly, enable his daughter to fulfil her human promise.

In both types a conscious decision is made by the protagonist to enter the hidden world and this is where the pure Occult Horror differs from the pure Supernatural Horror in which the protagonist is initially thrust into the hidden world unawares or has the hidden world surround them unbidden. This, in turn, leads to a crucial element of Occult Horror: the moral choice.

Characters make this choice, pay the price and are either redeemed by later making the correct moral choice or damned by not. *The Wicker Man* is an interesting case in point because of its complex ambiguity. If Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) had made the 'correct' moral choice (within the context of Summerisle's paganism), given in to his sexuality and fornicated with Willow (Britt Ekland), then he would not later have been sacrificed as a virgin.

The entire plot of *The Omen* hinges on the opening moment when the grief-stricken - hence fallible and weak - Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) decides to secretly substitute another baby for his wife's stillborn infant. In fact, grief itself is an Occult Horror trope as the occult often rushes in to fill the vacuum left by profound loss, especially when there is a lack of faith in a 'divine plan'; Sarah (Robin Tunney) has already lost her mother before the plot of *The Craft* gets started.

In *Hellraiser*, knowing what the puzzle box (or Lament Configuration to give its actual name) can do and opening it anyway, is not only pretty stupid, it is a pretty suspect moral choice. It is also a transgression: a key idea in Horror but especially in Occult Horror. Break the rules, in this case as laid down by millennia of patriarchal monotheism, and you may attain knowledge and power. You may even "taste our pleasures" as the Cenobites invite, but you will also surely suffer the consequences.

Other key tropes are invocation and summoning, for example, *Candyman* (say his name five times and he will appear); rituals,

which are great for generating suspense, for example, *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Devil Rides Out*; spells, for example, *The Craft*, which is a good lesson in how to reinvigorate this trope; and paraphernalia (which can make great MacGuffins) for example, *The Ninth Gate's* book, *Hellraiser's* box or *Long Time Dead's* Ouija board.

Apart from their *accoutrements*, occultists also need a temple away from prying eyes so they tend to practise their art somewhere remote or somewhere so hectic that no one will pay them much attention. Hence the preponderance of islands, remote castles, *chateaux* set in one thousand acre estates and cities. *The Craft* cleverly - and originally - is set in suburban L.A. but notice how a big deal is made of the huge empty house that Sarah, her father and step-mother move into at the outset.

Millennial fever produced a spate of Occult and Possession Horror movies, possibly triggered by mortal guilt at wholesale, secular ungodliness. *Stigmata*, *Lost Souls*, *Bless The Child*, *End of Days* and *Revelation*, to name but a few, had varying quality and differing success, but when it became apparent that Hollywood's latest Occult Horror, *Exorcist: The Beginning*, had to be virtually remade before its release (Renny Harlin executing as good as an entire re-shoot of Paul Schrader's original), maybe it is time to read the state of play, then rip it up and start afresh.

Originality is required, originality like having occultist Nazis summon a demon and then turning everything on its head and making that demon become a heroic force for good, as in *Hellboy*, or initiating an epic, endless cycle in which each transgressive protagonist becomes the antagonist for the next generation, as in *Hellraiser*, or asking, as *The Wicker Man* does, whether perhaps the pagans are the 'normal people' and the interloper is nothing but a repressed, puritan freak.

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