

Title: The Devil We Know: An Objective Look at the Prince of Darkness
Program Subjects: Folklore; Mythology
Year Produced: 2011
Directed by: Jessica Brown; Craig Ferguson
Produced by: Jessica Brown; John Wesley Chisholm
Distributed by: Films for the Humanities & Sciences
Reviewed by: Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Format: DVD
Running Time: 48 minutes
Color or B&W: Color
Audience Level: College – General Adult
Review:

Satan. Lucifer. Beelzebub. Old Nick. Mr. Scratch. The Tempter. The Prince of Darkness. The Devil, in his many guises, has had one hell of a career. He's been played on film by Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, George Burns, Rodney Dangerfield, Gabriel Byrne, and Viggo Mortensen. (And that's not counting the major off-screen roles he's played in *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, and *The Exorcist*.) He made the Yankees lose the pennant in the musical, *Damn Yankees*. He's the narrator of the Rolling Stones' best song, the main character in the only song that anyone knows by the Charlie Daniels Band, and the reputed source of bluesman Robert Johnson's musical genius. He's shown up in animated form on *South Park*, and played major roles in literature by Christopher Marlowe, John Milton, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, C.S. Lewis, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Neil Gaiman. But where did the character known as Satan come from? How has he changed over time? And what is it about him that continues to stir our imaginations?

The Devil We Know is a brief look at several thousand years of the Devil's history, "examining his manifestations in various religious traditions, in literature and the arts, and in our collective psychology." A series of commentators – professors of religion and sociology, a Catholic priest, church organist, tattoo artist, tarot card reader, "spiritual radio host," blues and heavy metal musicians, and others – discuss the origins, evolution, and continued popularity of Satan. The documentary begins with an examination of Satan as a character in the Bible and in Hebrew folklore, revealing the somewhat mixed-up origins of the word Satan (literally, "the adversary") and the character bearing that name. (Contrary to popular conception, the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve is never named as the Devil; he's merely a talking snake who is referred to as a "deceiver." Nor does the Bible ever call him Lucifer or recount the story of rebellious angels and a fall from heaven. These are pieces from Hebrew folklore which got swirled together with the biblical character after the fact.) Satan as God's antagonist does not show up until the Book of Job, where he wagers on the steadfastness of the title character and loses. He appears in a similar role in the New Testament, where he tempts Jesus during his time in the wilderness, but it's the Book of Revelation where he is in true movie villain form, warring with the angels in heaven, scouring the land in the form of a dragon to torment the faithful, and finally cast into a bottomless pit and burning lake.

From that source material, the film traces the Devil's evolution to the early Christian era, in which he was a simple personification of evil, to the animalistic monster of the medieval era, where he picked up the horns and cloven feet of pagan gods such as Baphomet, to his role in Dante's *Inferno* and both Marlowe and Goethe's retellings of the Faust legend, to his association with women and witches in the Renaissance era. Curiously, the film skips over perhaps the most influential literary version of the character, Milton's Satan from *Paradise Lost*, which cast him as a seductive romantic hero. (The Satan who plays a major role in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics is clearly of Miltonic heritage, and Al Pacino's

character in *The Devil's Advocate* goes by the alias John Milton.) It seems a major oversight for a film about Satan to omit this important incarnation.

Other topics include the role of the Devil in music, from the forbidden note progressions (“the tri-tone”) of the middle ages (used by Black Sabbath as late as 1970 to lend an air of menace to the title track on their debut album), to the blues musicians (of whom Robert Johnson is perhaps the most well-known) who reportedly sold their souls for musical mastery and the accompanying fame, to the (mostly imaginary) association of heavy metal music with Satanism. Representations of the Devil on film, rites of exorcism, the “Satanic cult” craze of the 1980s, Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan, and the Devil’s continued popularity in lingerie and costume shops and tattoo parlors are all picked up and briefly commented upon.

Overall the film is entertaining and reasonably educational, introducing the viewer to various cultural incarnations of the Prince of Darkness. There is an interesting diversity of commentators, most of whom have reasonably intelligent things to say, even if some of the analysis is fairly superficial. (The settings for their interviews – mostly darkened offices and churches – seem a little clichéd but stop short of being silly.) One major criticism: the images used throughout are repetitive, generally the same dozen cartoonish devil images, illuminated pages from the Bible and Dante, lithographs of witch burnings, etc. They are interesting the first or second time they come on screen, but wear thin as the film continues through its forty-eight minutes. The sound production is also a bit muddled; at several points the volume of the ominous background music makes it difficult to hear the narration. Still, there is enough unique content here to recommend the film, especially for use in undergraduate courses on religion and culture, or perhaps as a supplement to study of film or literature which prominently features the Devil.

Reviewer Rating: Recommended