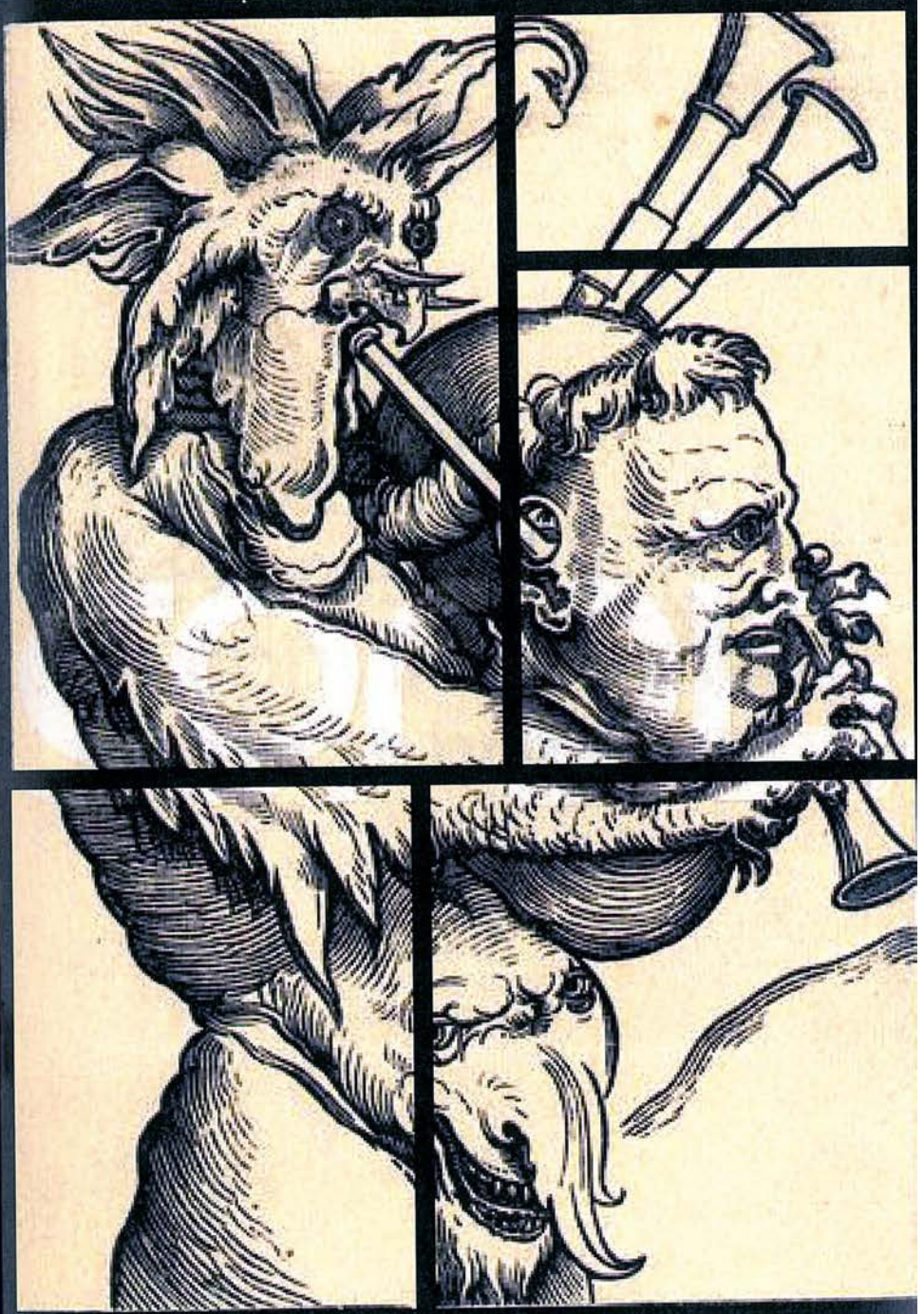


FACT SHEET

# BRING ON THE DEVIL

*Jan Vervoort*

CAICO ISSUES N°9



The Devil's  
cleverest wife is  
to convince us that  
he does not exist.

*Baudelaire*

## BRING ON THE DEVIL

On the romantic cult of radical individualism

Who is the devil? Throughout the centuries many answers have been given to this question. The character of the devil has served as a screen onto which ideals and utopias have been projected. To speak of ideals and utopias is to say that the devil is not simply the representative of evil in the moral discourse of religion. It is in the realm of culture and cult that the figure of the devil has been charged with the many dreams and fantasies which make him into the glamorous multi-faceted persona he is. One important influence on the modern incarnation of the devil has been by the cult of darkness celebrated by romantic poets of the 19th century such as Baudelaire or Byron. Their version of the prince of darkness in turn goes back to the milestone of Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. Milton's interpretation of Satan as the fallen but heroic rebel angel has made the devil the idol of all outlaws. As such the devil has become a prime source of identification for many different performers on the social stage of culture. A romantic role model for poets, artists, actors, vamps, divas, dandys, disintegrated teenagers and all who like to be known as mad, bad and dangerous to know.

What is crucial to the romantic infatuation with the devil is his relation to excess. The devil not only promises excess but also embodies what he promises. This is why the devil invites identification. As an idol he stands in for what he stands for. He offers excess in terms of sensual pleasure and occult knowledge. Both promises add up to a third, that of excessive power. By undergoing the experiences and grasping the knowledge the devil offers the individual who gets involved with him gains sovereignty. Again, the devil guarantees for the validity of this offer by being the ultimate sovereign individual himself, a proud, cruel and lustful hedonist with no respect for the law and the weak who need its protection. So what is at stake in the dark romantic concept of the devil is an utopian vision of radical individuality, an individuality radicalized through the extraordinary experience and knowledge provided by the devil. A key motive for the romantic to get in touch with the devil is the yearning to rise above the average, to get more out of life than everyday life in a regimented society has to offer. This yearning in turn gives rise to a distinctive trait of the modern devil. He can be recognized by the contempt he flaunts towards normality, the society which preserves this normality, and the 'average citizens' who epitomize the normal way of life. The proud devil discards the social as such as the source of all mediocrity.

In doing what society forbids the sovereign devil exposes the limits of its normative discourse and call its legitimacy into question. By going against the grain of the social, however, the devilish individual nevertheless defines itself in relation to the social. As the provocation he thrives on is addressed to society, the devil can't do without it. The complicated nature of the mutual negotiations between society and the devil has given rise to a number of intricate rituals and social practices. On the one hand there are the rituals and performance skills you need to familiarize yourself with if you wish or happen to be the devil and seek to reveal your true nature to society. These skills involve techniques of embodiment designed to solve problems of authentication (see section 2): How can you erase all doubt regarding the authenticity of your Satanic identity without giving your game away by exposing too much? Moreover, like all social practices of embodying a role, also performing the devil is a gendered performance. Male and female devils act and dress differently (see section 3 and 4).

On the other hand there are the rituals employed by society to either conjure up or exorcise the devil. There are many traditional techniques of making the devil work for you and put the pleasures and powers he commands at the service of society and everyday purposes – just as there are rituals for restricting his influence (see section 5). Finally dealing with the devil is also a matter of politics. How should one cope with the devil when the laws he and his disciples call into question are the principles on which democracy and liberal society is founded (see section 6). Should a democratic state arrest and expell the devil to protect its constitution? Or does democracy need the devil to shake up the system from time to time and thus point to the blind spots (without an understanding of which no democracy can be truly democratic)? This essay cannot offer a comprehensive account of the history of ideas associated with the devil in various darkly romantic cults. It is only a sketchy attempt to assemble a set of motifs that point to what personal, social, sexual, theatrical, epistemological and political issues might be at stake in the cult of the heroic rebel angel.

## 1. Satan, Lucifer and other devils

One reason for the richness of the imaginary generated in relation to the figure of the devil is the fact that in the biblical tradition the identity of the devil is not fixed. There is not one but diverse devils with different histories. For the modern romantic cult of the devil as rebel angel, however, the stories of Satan and of Lucifer are the most interesting ones to tell. In his book

1. Luther Link: THE DEVIL, A MASK WITHOUT A FACE. Reaktion Books, London 1995.

2. Elaine Pagels: THE ORIGIN OF SATAN. Random House, New York and Toronto 1995.

THE DEVIL, A MASK WITHOUT A FACE Luther Link gives an instructive (and entertaining) introduction into the background to the devil's different incarnations.<sup>1</sup> In the old testament, the figure of Satan, to start with, is not intrinsically evil. Satan is simply the chief prosecutor in god's heavenly court. It is his job to identify a potential culprit and formulate the accusation against him. God has given Satan a clear mandate, in juristical terms he is the accuser and adversary. His task, however, has different aspects. As Elaine Pagels elaborates in her book THE ORIGIN OF SATAN<sup>2</sup> the root of the hebrew word Satan, ḡstn, indicates someone who resists or thwarts a plan, while the greek translation 'diabolos' literal means 'someone, who throws something in your way. In the book NUMERI (22, 22-33), for instance, Satan is sent out to literally block the path of a man called Bileam to stop him from continuing on a road that would lead him into mischief and trouble. In the book HIJOB, Pagels points out, the figure of the Satan might have been modelled after the agents of the king of Persia's secret police which at the time were scanning the Israelites for potential dissidents. Here Satan denounces rich and mighty Hiob to god as a potential lawbreaker. He is then ordered to give Hiob a hard time and survey whether the tribulations bring out the criminal in him or not. Several facettes of Satan's character entered into the romantic reinterpretation of the devil as hero: It is the secrecy and cunning of his doings, his role as the adversary par excellence, but most of all the practice of accusation, the gesture of the 'accuse which has become the trademark of the modern critical artist or intellectual. Yet, the crucial difference between the Satan of the old testament and his romantic re-incarnation is, that in the bible Satan formulates his accusations in the name of the law, whereas in his modern guise it is the law itself he accuses. The story of Lucifer is more glamorous and suggestive but also far more complicated than that of Satan. Initially the term 'Lucifer' (bearer of light) was coined by poets like Ovid to name the Venus, the morning star, and describe the sparkling brilliance of the brightest star in the night sky. The prophet Isaiah in turn appropriated the name as a metaphor to describe the downfall of a mighty tyrann to have been as dramatic as if the morning star had dropped from the sky. This metaphor in turn was appropriated by Christian scholar Augustine who, 300 years after Christ, had to find a good theological explanation for the existence of evil. He reasoned that god did not create evil. He merely created an angel who freely chose to be evil and thus fell from heaven. Since Isaiah had described the spectacular fall from grace of someone called Lucifer, Augustine decided to stick with the name and reinterpret the prophet's

image as depicting the birth of the devil. Apart from this there are different accounts in the bible of an uprising in heaven which ended with the expulsion of the rebel angels. Yet, in these accounts the chief agitator is never called Lucifer. By naming him so Augustine gave him an important character trait. He credited the devil with exceptional brilliance. Augustine explicitly marks out Lucifer's big ego as the reason why god got cross with him. Too proud to be bossed around Lucifer refused to obey his orders and was fired.

Other biblical reports about angels behaving badly identify sex and seduction as the reason for the expulsion from heaven. GENESIS chapter 6 includes a particular episode, a longer version of which can be found in the book of Enoch, from where, as scholars argue, the section in GENESIS was initially quoted. (The book of ENOCH dates back to c. 300 BC and had been part of the collection of biblical texts, but was later excluded from the canon. It continues to be essential reading in the occult sciences.) This story recounts how a group of angels called the Nephilim seduced the first daughters of man. God threw them out of heaven into a hole in the desert which was to become hell. The affair had lasting consequences though. As early christian Father Tertullian (AD 155-220) informs us, the Nephilim passed on secret knowledge to mankind. They told the men how to build weapons and the women how to use mascara.<sup>3</sup> If you now blend the stories of Lucifer and the Nephilim the rebel angel emerges as a supreme dissident individual. It is by virtue of his brilliance and pride that Lucifer stands out from the crowd of angels. And, as the Nephilim show, the rebel angels have knowledge to offer. They initiate their victims to the secret savoir faire of sexuality and technical science. This heroic interpretation of the devil, however, Link argues only becomes popular during Romanticism. Throughout the middle ages there is almost no portrayal of the devil as the beautiful rebel angel Lucifer. The motive starts emerging in the Renaissance. Still, William Blake, for instance in his illustrations for Milton's PARADISE LOST was among the first to make the devil look handsome.<sup>4</sup>

3. Tertullian: THE APPAREL OF WOMEN, 2:1. Cited in Link, op. cit., p.29.

## 2. The Romantic Experience and the Authenticity of the Devil

Given the independence, strength, pride, and uncompromising willpower of the devil it is immediately understandable why he could serve as a role model for a radical concept of modern individualism. Satan and Lucifer embody autonomy. This, however, does not yet explain why the devil became beautiful. That is, why, in the eyes of the Romantics the devil came to represent an ideal individual not only in terms of ethical and political

4. Mario Praz: THE ROMANTIC AGONY, London: Oxford University Press, 1933  
Original: LA CARNE, LA MORTE E IL DIAVOLO NELLA LETTERATURA ROMANTICA. Sansoni Editore, Florence 1930.  
I am very much indebted to Daniel Pies for pointing this book out to me.

5. Baudelaire: JOURNAUX INTIMES, quoted after Link, op. cit., p.182.  
'J'ai trouvé la définition du Beau, de mon Beau. C'est quelque chose d'ardent et de triste ... Je ne conçois guère un type de Beauté où il n'y ait due Malheur. Appuyé sur—d'autres diraient: obsédé par—ces idées, on conçoit qu'il me serait difficile de ne pas conclure que le plus parfait type de Beauté virile est Satan—à la manière de Milton.'

souvereignty but also in terms of aesthetic qualities. In his comprehensive guide to the literary tradition of black romanticism, LA CARNE, LA MORTE E IL DIAVOLO NELLA LETTERATURA ROMANTICA<sup>4</sup>, Mario Praz answers this question. Praz shows that the remodelling of the devil in the romantic literature of the 19th century from Novalis to Baudelaire is closely linked to a new concept of beauty. Contrary to the classicist definition of beauty as the manifestation of a totality in perfect harmony, romanticism charges beauty with the disruptive dynamics of the sublime. The new ideal is experienced as a concurrence of beauty and horror, pleasure and pain. This riddled beauty is not just a new concept, it is, first of all, also a new type of experience: an excessive experience, or rather, an experience of excess. And if beauty cannot be separated from the sensation in which it manifests itself, it seems only logical to imagine a body shaped by the experience of the new ideal. This body is the body of Satan/Lucifer. This conclusion is formulated explicitly by Baudelaire:

'I have found the definition of Beauty, of my Beauty. It is a thing passionate and sad. ... I cannot imagine Beauty where there is no adversity. ... It is hard for me not to conclude that the most perfect type of virile beauty is Satan—in the manner of Milton.'<sup>5</sup>

Baudelaire's definition of Satan as the perfect type of virile beauty makes it clear that the body of beauty is always gendered. It does not have to be male though. The romantic idea of an individual singled out by the capacity to experience sublime beauty and excessive pleasure applies to both sexes. Based on this idea two gender role models are introduced: the sensitive man and the desiring woman (as fantasised by male authors). The social performances and problems linked to these gender roles will be dealt with in the following two sections.

The body of Satanic beauty, however, is also a body of questionable evidence. The individualist outsider faces a conflict of authentication, since he or she has to prove to society that the experience that singles him or her out, is for real. The problem arises because, by definition this experience can only be made by the singular individual capable of making it, or within an inner circle of peers. The public is always excluded from the scene of this experience. It is thus likely that the public will neither understand nor believe the story the Satanic individuals have to tell, since there is no way of checking its truth. This is why Satanic individuals are always under suspicion to be a potential impostors. Are they not making things up to show off and make others feel bad about having missed the party? So

it is not only their outstanding character but also the impossibility to make themselves understood that disintegrates Satanic individuals from society. Isolated from others who could share the belief in the truth of their singular experience they might find it hard to believe in (it) themselves. Iron Maiden put it poignantly in *NUMBER OF THE BEAST* (1982):

'What did I see, can I believe, / That what I saw last night was real / And not just fantasy.'

Without any opportunity of direct communication the romantic devils have to invent other ways of coming out in public. These shall also be dealt with in the following two sections.

### 3. The Innuendo of the Dandy Devil

It is essential to the romantic drama of the male rebel angel that his hyper-sensitivity (which allows him to feel and perceive more than others do) is portrayed as both blessing and curse. As the chosen one, Praz points out, the sensitive man becomes a 'marked' one. He appears traumatized by the insights and experiences he holds within himself but cannot communicate to the outside world. The trauma of Lucifer's fall from heaven is set in parallel to the disintegration of the romantic individual from society due to his outstanding intellectual and emotional capacities. In this sense Byron writes in *LARA* (Canto I, 17-19)

'He stood a stranger in this breathing world, / An erring spirit from another hurl'd (...) / With more capacity for love than earth / Bestows on most of mortal mould and birth.'

Now, Praz describes two means by which the heroic outcast can enter the social stage and give evidence to his true nature. The first medium to be mentioned is death. The rebel angel can articulate his traumatic identity if he spreads his disease and brings death and disaster upon himself and those foolish enough to love him. Destruction becomes a form of authentication. Byron provides the formula to this melodrama: 'My embrace was fatal ... I loved her, and destroy'd her' (*MANFRED* II act, 1st+2nd scene). To show that Byron practiced what he preached Praz quotes Colburn Maynes' *THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ANNE ISABELLA, LADY NOEL BYRON, (1929)*. In this account of the relationship between Byron and his wife Annabella, the poet is described as a cruel sadist, who considered his marriage as act of revenge against Annabella (for refusing him at an earlier date) and tortured her by threatening to throttle his newborn child, faking incestuous ties with his stepsister Augusta and more. Like in a game of *Potlach* it seems that, to proof his autonomy, the Satanic individual takes revenge for the profound humiliation of receiving love, a gift you can neither refuse nor control. He must shame the donor by returning a greater gift than love: death.

In different ways this romantic role-play has remained in effect to the present day. To present yourself as a cruel and cynical man of mystery continues to be an attractive option. At the same time death has remained a seal of authenticity. For many performers in rock'n'roll like Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix or Bon Scott a death caused by excess is a means to testify irreversibly that their excessive performance on stage was for real and not just theatrical. In *SCORPIO RISING* Kenneth Anger stages this cycle in exemplary manner. The film begins by showing a rocker dressing up, lovingly assembling his gear and polish his motorcycle. The identity of the performer is staged as a carefully prepared pose. The film then ends with a motorcycle race that culminates in the death of the protagonist. The romantic logic demands the performer to push things to an extreme where the pose gets real in death. Finally Curt Cobain also followed the romantic agenda by conceiving his suicide as the only possible way to make himself understood and to reveal his authentic self to an audience influenced by 'misconstrued' media images.

The second way of articulating the hidden secret of the Satanic self is more playful and aesthetic. It is the smile, or rather sneer of the devil. A highly refined form of an innuendo that fits in perfectly with a Dandy's sophisticated code of mannerisms. In the aforementioned Canto Lara Byron characterizes his otherworldly hero as follows:

'But owned a smile, if oft observed and near,  
Waned in its mirth, and wither'd to a sneer;  
That smile might reach his lip, but pass'd not by,  
None e'er could trace its laughter to his eye.'

This sneer happens to be a traditional trademark of the prince of darkness. In the 6th book of Mose, for instance (an anonymous guide to black magic discovered around 1600), the entrance of Lucifer is described as follows<sup>6</sup>:

'When all light has suddenly faded away, then you will encounter a creature, more beautiful than any the daughters of man have ever given birth to! His countenance resembles that of god, only slightly disfigured by a trace of arrogance, by an uncanny sparkle in his eyes, and a sneer around the corner's of his mouth: that is the great Lucifer, the fallen archangel and highest of all devils, the lord of the underworld.'<sup>7</sup>

It seems only natural that the devil shows through his smile what words can't express. As the rules of conduct and standards of conversation do not allow the Satanic individual to adequately articulate his profound knowledge of scandalous experiences he has to resort to an allusive innuendo. That which cannot be said in the open is thus implied in the ambiguities of a mysterious

6. DAS SECHSTE UND SIEBTE BUCH MOSES, reedited by Planet-Verlag Braunschweig 1950. I thank Hennig Hahn for borrowing this treasure to me.

7. Author's translation. The devil appears at the end of 4th chapter.

smile. Like every innuendo this smile splits the audience into two parts: Into the 'naives' who can only interpret the sneer as a sign of boundless arrogance. And into the 'knowing' who recognize a peer by the sneer as their own experience has familiarized them with the secret knowledge alluded to in the innuendo. The coded communication among the devil and his disciples thus epitomizes the rites of secret societies (based on religious, political or sexual orientation). Furtive signs are used to both reveal and conceal an identity which is deemed deviant by the social majority. At the same time strangers are tested if they can read the code and thus identify themselves as being, as they say in Spanish, 'de la familia'. The devil emerges as the ideal patron for subversive alliances and invisible networks.

## 4.

## She-devils in Disguise

Notably, also female incarnations of the devil are recognizable by their smile. Like their male counterparts their smile indicates the possession of a profound and unnamable knowledge. The mysterious facial play of the Satanic woman is modelled, of course, on that of the Sphinx. Oscar Wilde describes it like this:

'How subtle-secret is your smile! Did you love none then? / Nay, I know / Great Ammon was your bedfellow! ... / With blood of goats and blood of steers you taught him monstrous miracles. ... / And with your curved archaic smile you watched his passion come and go.'<sup>8</sup>

Romantic poets saw the Satanic smile in the faces of many women. In an essay, Mario Praz describes as an important influence for the Romantics, Walter Pater, for instance, discovered it on the lips of the Mona Lisa. As a demonic woman the Gioconda is recast as the holy whore of Babylon who, as she has seen centuries go by and empires crumble, only has a malicious smile for the futile ambitions of men.

Moreover, it is also through bringing death upon her lovers that the romantic she-devil reveals her true identity. In this context Cleopatra serves as a key source of inspiration. Praz explains that the legend of the beautiful empress reputed to kill her lovers after enjoying their body was initially derived from a single line in the *LIBER DE VIRIS ILLUSTRIBUS* (86,2)<sup>9</sup>:

'Haec tantae libidinis fuit, ut saepe prosterit, tantae pulchritudinis ut multi noctem illius morte emerint.' (She was so lustful, that she often whored around, and so beautiful that many paid for a night with her with their death).

From Swinburne over Flaubert to Puschkin many authors of the 19th century have formulated their fantasies about the supreme seductress Cleopatra.<sup>10</sup> And also her demonic sisters are legion: Salomé, Judith, Carmen, Maria Stuart, Rosamond (the concubine

8. Oscar Wilde: *THE SPHINX*, originally published in 1894. Quoted after: OSCAR WILDE, COLLECTED EDITION, Harper Collins, Glasgow 1994, p.878

9. An anthology about the lives of the famous written in the 3rd century after Christ by Sextus Aurelius Victor.

10. Puschkin: *CLEOPATRA E I SUOI AMANTI*, in: *EGYPTIAN NIGHTS* (1835) Flaubert dedicates a passage to Cleopatra in *L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE* (1845), *ŒUVRES DE JEUN.* III, p.160f. Swinburne published his early poem *CLEOPATRA* in *THE CORNHILL MAGAZINE* in 1866.

of Henry II) and more have alternately embodied the fantasy of a woman empowered by her desire.

There are, however, different ways of displaying the power of this desire. On the one hand there are women like Cleopatra who are, as it were, out and proud. Their attraction and sovereignty is directly related to the public visibility of their lust. They veil nothing. The aura of their demonic sexuality turns them into 'blazing stars' (as J. Webster puts it). Whoever gets involved with these femmes fatales knows what he is in for. On the other hand there are women with veiled interests. The revelation of their desire is then staged in a climatic scene. As an influential example for this variante Praz names the gothic novel *AMBROSIO, OR THE MONK* written by Mathew Gregory Lewis in 1796. In this story the witch Matilda intrudes into the abbey of poor Ambrosio in the disguise of a novice. She maddens the monk with desire and finally reveals herself to be Satan's servant in a black mess held in the abby's crypta. But also in less arcane ways the male discovery of female sexuality has been celebrated as the unmasking of the devil, most famously, of course, by Elvis:

'You look like an angel / Walk like an angel / Talk like an angel / But I got wise / You're the devil in disguise.'

(*DEVIL IN DISGUISE*, recorded in 1963, also features on the soundtrack of Anger's *SCORPIO RISING*.)

It is only a short step from the *DEVIL IN DISGUISE* to the *DEVIL IN MISS JONES*, one of the first hardcore porn feature films produced in 1972. In her discussion of this film feminist scholar Linda Williams links the drama of the disguise and disclosure of female desire to a fundamental problem in the patriarchal politics of representation.<sup>11</sup> Her thesis is that even though the genre of the pornographic film produces myriad images of women's bodies, it is haunted by the impossibility to give authentic visual evidence of the female orgasm. While the 'come shot' has been established as a conventional means to give undeniable proof of the male climax, no image can testify to the fact that the female actress is not faking hers. As the desire to fully visualize female lust is always frustrated by the possibility of the fake, Williams argues, this lust is demonized. (In the film the insatiable Miss Jones, for instance, never reaches satisfaction, the devil never comes out, it always stays invisible inside her body.) It thus seems no coincidence that also in the male discourse of the romantic imaginary the Satanic idol of the desiring woman is constructed around the limits of the visible. Her character oscillates between the hypervisibility of the courtesan empress or the invisibility of the devil in disguise.

11. Linda Williams: *HARDCORE: POWER, PLEASURE AND THE 'FRENZY OF THE VISIBLE'*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989; chapter 6.

19. Aleister CROWLEY: THE BOOK OF THE LAW – LIBER AL VEL LEGIS., Sphinx Verlag, Basel 1993.

20. Ibid. pp.48-49

21. Friedrich Nietzsche: JENSEITS VON GUT UND BÖSE, Volume 5 in the collected works, De Gruyter, Berlin / New York 1967 ff.

22. Ibid. p.38.

23. Ibid. p.72.

24. This information is taken from George Pendle: STRANGE ANGELS. In: frieze 65, March 2002, p.58-63. Although the account seems entirely convincing Scientology have denied the truth of the information.

as the core of the romantic cult of the devil as rebel angel: the celebration of individualism. Crowley proposes a radical vision of the sovereign and antisocial individual. The principles of this philosophy can be studied in one of his first major works The book of the law – LIBER AL VEL LEGIS.<sup>19</sup> The three parts of the book, Crowley claims, were dictated to him in Cairo on the 8th, 9th and 10th of April 1904 by an extra-terrestrial intelligence called Aiwass, minister of Hoor-paar-kraat, the lord of silence. Before the reception of the book voices had guided Crowley to the stele of revelation in Kairo's Boulak Museum, an artefact catalogued under the number 666. The book, written in a strangely archaic idiom, comprises many psalms that call for a culture of sovereign Satanic hedonists who know how to give form to their excessive pleasures, like for instance:

70. 'There is help & hope in other spells. Wisdom says: be strong! Then canst thou bear more joy. Be not animal; refine thy rapture! If thou drink, drink by the eight and ninety rules of art: if you love, exceed by delicacy; and if thou do aught joyous, let there be subtlety therein!

71. But exceed! exceed!' <sup>20</sup>

The central passages of the book, however follow a similar line of reasoning as Nietzsche's argument against the 'slave-morality' of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> In short, Nietzsche argues, that it was Christianity's biggest coup to invert man's natural tendency to admire the strong and despise the weak into its opposite. He claims, Christian morals established the tyranny of the weak over the strong by spurring resentiments against outstanding individuals. Like Nietzsche Crowley demands a revolution that restores the strong and unique to their rightful place of power. The utopian community Crowley envisions is a secret brotherhood of the strong and ruthless who recognize no law except their own free will:

21. 'We have nothing with the outcast and unfit: let them die in their misery. For they feel not. Compassion is the vice of kings: stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law and the joy of the world.(...)'<sup>22</sup>

58. But the keen and the proud, the royal and the lofty; ye are brothers!

59. As brothers fight ye!

60. There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt.'<sup>23</sup>

The argument culminates in the simple sentence of psalm 69: 'There is success.' If you read this it probably comes as no surprise that the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard is reputed to have frequented the Pasadena lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientes, the order Crowley presided over, in the mid 1940s.<sup>24</sup>

6.

## Do democracies need the devil or are we better off without him?

Is it acceptable that the bottom line of the romantic vision of the Satanic individual is a power politics which calls for a law of the strong and the disruption of a society based on the solidarity with the weak? Does romanticism have to end where political realities begin? Or do socio-political interpretations distort the truth of romanticism? In MORE BRILLIANT THAN THE SUN, for instance, Kodwo Eshun remains firmly in the tradition of a Satanic cult of excess when he argues that the 'hypersensual' intensity of radically progressive aesthetic experiences is intrinsically linked to the 'unreality principle' of an 'antisocial surrealism'.<sup>25</sup> The socio-political interpretations of radical subcultures produced by (well-meant) Cultural Studies scholars can never grasp the core experience of these cultures as it lies far beyond the social. So does interpretation have to end at this point? Maybe yes.

Or maybe no. There are some interesting models and arguments concerning the question of how democracies should deal with individual agents that seek to overthrow the universal principles of consensus, equality and solidarity on which they are based. In his book A PLEA FOR INTOLERANCE Slavoj Žižek<sup>26</sup> for instance, reasons that democracies actually do need forces to disturb the rules of their game. By declaring all men equal constitutions based on humanist ethics nevertheless define equality according to certain standards which are treated as given (by nature) and thus excluded from further discussion. Such definitions, Žižek claims, always have an exclusive dimension, something or someone will always not fit the bill and thus be tacitly barred from entering the discourse of democracy. According to Žižek, the only way to show what is excluded is what he terms the 'intervention' of an unruly agent who enters the discourse by force, violates the protocol and thereby throws into relief on what tacit assumptions and exclusive standards this discourse is founded. Democracy needs an intimate enemy, and adversary, a Satan within its system, to check the blind spots of its constitution.

As convincing as this argument might sound, René Girard would probably not agree. In his most recent book JE VOIS SATAN TOMBER COMME L'ÉCLAIR the anthropologist puts forward an ardent defense of the democratic revolution of Christian morals.<sup>27</sup> He explicitly rejects the romantic belief in a Satanic cult of individual strength based on a Nietzschean

25. Kodwo Eshun: MORE BRILLIANT THAN THE SUN, Quartet Books, London 1998, p.-004.

26. Slavoj Žižek: A PLEA FOR INTOLERANCE / PLÄDOYER FÜR INTOLERANZ. Passagen Verlag, Wien, 2001.

27. René Girard: JE VOIS SATAN TOMBER COMME L'ÉCLAIR, Paris, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle 1999.

## 5. How to be successful with Satan

The occult fascination with the limits of perception is familiar to anyone who has ever played a record backwards in search for hidden messages. One might expect this yearning to see the invisible and know the unknowable to give rise to superstitions and irrational beliefs. On the contrary, however, occultism has over centuries produced a specific form of rationality. What is most striking about occult theories is their utterly systematic character. It can make your head spin to realize that there are countless systematic accounts of what the unknown is and how it can be accessed. Especially the turn of last century saw a boom of occult theories. It is interesting to see that during this time occultism was never at odds with science. In fact, the discovery of X-rays, radioactivity and wireless communication was widely interpreted as the objective proof for the existence of invisible forces.<sup>12</sup>

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky for instance, who founded the theosophic society in 1875, saw no major difference between telepathic and telegraphic communication. She claimed both were transmitted through the same universal medium of the ether, which in turn was also the bridge to the invisible hyperspace of the 4th dimension. For us living in the age of electrosmog where literally the air around us is polluted with transmitted information, Blavatsky's theories have a beautiful innocence. She described the invisible ether not only to transmit but also to store words, sounds and pictures with the consequence that the 4th dimension was to be imagined as a vast audiovisual archive.<sup>13</sup> In 1995 the exhibition OCCULTISM AND AVANTGARDE presented a comprehensive survey of the effects these theories had on the concepts of many modernist artists of the time.<sup>14</sup> To give only a few examples: Duchamp's infatuation with the 4th dimension is legendary. The artists of the Blaue Reiter, among them especially Kandinsky and Jawlensky, often visited the Theosophic circles of Munich as well as the lectures of Rudolf Steiner. Frantisek Kupka published extensively about the role of the modern artist as an emitter and the artwork as a transmitter of invisible rays. As photography was seen as a magical 'third eye' capable of recording ethereal images, ghost-photographies enjoyed great popularity in the 1860s and 1870s and spurred the careers of people like Jean Buguet, William H. Mumler from Boston or John Beattie, a pensioneer from Bristol.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to see that this focus on the technicalities of dealing with the unknown can also be found in older occultist texts like the aforementioned 6TH AND 7TH BOOK OF MOSE. While the 7TH BOOK OF MOSE is a collection of household cures against anything from toothache to flatulence, the

12. A comprehensive survey is given in Linda Dalrymple Henderson: DIE MODERNE KUNST UND DAS UNSICHTBARE. In: Linda Dalrymple Henderson & Veit Loers (ed.): OKKULTISMUS UND AVANTGARDE—VON MUNCH BIS MONDRIAN 1900–1915, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt 1995.

13. Ibid.

14. OKKULTISMUS UND AVANTGARDE—VON MUNCH BIS MONDRIAN 1900–1915, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt 1995.

15. Andreas Fischer: EIN NACHTGEBIET DER FOTOGRAFIE, in OKKULTISMUS UND AVANTGARDE, op. cit., p.503-552.

6TH BOOK OF MOSE offers rational advice, precise protocols and technical details about how to get in touch and do business with the devil. The book in fact reads like an introduction to the art of diplomacy: When negotiating with the devil you are advised to always stick to the protocol, be polite but firm, never accept your opponent's conditions but always make him accept yours. Moreover, the book provides a fully worked out model contract. The devil is required to help you to the nearest treasure and has to be at your service for two hours each day at fixed points in time (the recommended schedule for the devil's working hours is: Monday at ten and midnight, Tuesday at eleven and one in the morning, Wednesday at midnight and two in the morning, Thursday at eight and eleven at night, Friday at nine and midnight and Saturday at ten and one in the morning). Violations of ritual protocols, the book warns, can cause anger among demons. If you stick to the rules with extra care next time, however, things should be smoothed out as demons are not resentful.

Another striking 20th century example for this operative definition of occult practice are the writings and teachings of Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). Crowley understood himself as a 'mystic atheist'.<sup>16</sup> With amazing speed he converted to, founded or led numerous different cults or religions.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, he conceived occultism not so much as a system of belief but rather as a practical means to produce higher states of consciousness. Consequently his concept of 'Magick' is radically eclectic. Any available technique, be that magic, sex, drugs or yoga is included in his system if it does the job of producing the desired state of ecstasy. His biography and publications mirror this eclecticism. Crowley, a wealthy heir, burned his cash by travelling all around the globe (climbing mountains in the Alpes, Mexico and Himalaya) and accumulating the knowledge of the most diverse cults and religions. He published comprehensive studies about anything from astrology and tarot over tantra and sex magi to Yoga, I Ging and Sufism as well as the Kabbala and numerology. In this sense Crowley appears as a cosmopolitan modernist trying to create a universal cult that brings together the best of all secret knowledge in the history of mankind.<sup>18</sup>

To highlight the rational, technical and operative dimension of occultism is to point to the fact that the unknown, invisible and demonic is not conceptualized as a radical 'other'. Ritualized practices, protocols and contracts are developed to mediate between normal reality and the forces that transcend it. At the same time, of course, there is more at stake in these shemes. Again the teachings of Crowley provide a good example since they allow us to come full circle back to what was initially identified

16. See Christian Bouchet: ALEISTER CROWLEY, Urania Verlag, Neuhausen 2000. As an example for Crowley's atheist conviction Bouchet quotes Crowley's text CARTE POSTALE AUX IMPÉTRANTS, however without giving the date or place of its publication.

17. Crowley became a member of the Jacobites in 1896, joined the cult of the Golden Dawn in 1898, founded the abbey of Thelema in Sicily in 1920 and became the head priest of the Ordo Templi Orientalis in 1925 (to give only a few examples).

18. Crowley has been worshipped by many protagonists of pop-(sub)culture. Kenneth Anger's film INAUGURATION OF THE PLEASURE DOME (1954) for instance, is more or less a Crowlean ritual staged for the camera. The Beatles included a photo of Crowley in the collage on the cover of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Of course the influence can also be traced in the Stones' SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL and the album HIS SATANIC MAJESTY REQUESTS. Led Zeppelin's Jimmi Page is a reknown collector of Crowleyana, etc.

19. Aleister CROWLEY: THE BOOK OF THE LAW – LIBER AL VEL LEGIS., Sphinx Verlag, Basel 1993.

20. Ibid. pp.48-49

21. Friedrich Nietzsche: JENSEITS VON GUT UND BÖSE, Volume 5 in the collected works, De Gruyter, Berlin / New York 1967 ff.

22. Ibid. p.38.

23. Ibid. p.72.

24. This information is taken from George Pendle: STRANGE ANGELS. In: frieze 65, March 2002, p.58-63. Although the account seems entirely convincing Scientology have denied the truth of the information.

as the core of the romantic cult of the devil as rebel angel: the celebration of individualism. Crowley proposes a radical vision of the sovereign and antisocial individual. The principles of this philosophy can be studied in one of his first major works The book of the law – LIBER AL VEL LEGIS.<sup>19</sup> The three parts of the book, Crowley claims, were dictated to him in Cairo on the 8th, 9th and 10th of April 1904 by an extra-terrestrial intelligence called Aiwass, minister of Hoor-paar-kraat, the lord of silence. Before the reception of the book voices had guided Crowley to the stele of revelation in Kairo's Boulak Museum, an artefact catalogued under the number 666. The book, written in a strangely archaic idiom, comprises many psalms that call for a culture of sovereign Satanic hedonists who know how to give form to their excessive pleasures, like for instance:

70. 'There is help & hope in other spells. Wisdom says: be strong! Then canst thou bear more joy. Be not animal; refine thy rapture! If thou drink, drink by the eight and ninety rules of art: if you love, exceed by delicacy; and if thou do aught joyous, let there be subtlety therein!

71. But exceed! exceed!' <sup>20</sup>

The central passages of the book, however follow a similar line of reasoning as Nietzsche's argument against the 'slave-morality' of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> In short, Nietzsche argues, that it was Christianity's biggest coup to invert man's natural tendency to admire the strong and despise the weak into its opposite. He claims, Christian morals established the tyranny of the weak over the strong by spurring resentments against outstanding individuals. Like Nietzsche Crowley demands a revolution that restores the strong and unique to their rightful place of power. The utopian community Crowley envisions is a secret brotherhood of the strong and ruthless who recognize no law except their own free will:

21. 'We have nothing with the outcast and unfit: let them die in their misery. For they feel not. Compassion is the vice of kings: stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law and the joy of the world.(...)'<sup>22</sup>

58. But the keen and the proud, the royal and the lofty; ye are brothers!

59. As brothers fight ye!

60. There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt.'<sup>23</sup>

The argument culminates in the simple sentence of psalm 69: 'There is success.' If you read this it probably comes as no surprise that the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard is reputed to have frequented the Pasadena lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientes, the order Crowley presided over, in the mid 1940s.<sup>24</sup>

6.

## Do democracies need the devil or are we better off without him?

Is it acceptable that the bottom line of the romantic vision of the Satanic individual is a power politics which calls for a law of the strong and the disruption of a society based on the solidarity with the weak? Does romanticism have to end where political realities begin? Or do socio-political interpretations distort the truth of romanticism? In MORE BRILLIANT THAN THE SUN, for instance, Kodwo Eshun remains firmly in the tradition of a Satanic cult of excess when he argues that the 'hypersensual' intensity of radically progressive aesthetic experiences is intrinsically linked to the 'unreality principle' of an 'antisocial surrealism'.<sup>25</sup> The socio-political interpretations of radical subcultures produced by (well-meant) Cultural Studies scholars can never grasp the core experience of these cultures as it lies far beyond the social. So does interpretation have to end at this point? Maybe yes.

Or maybe no. There are some interesting models and arguments concerning the question of how democracies should deal with individual agents that seek to overthrow the universal principles of consensus, equality and solidarity on which they are based. In his book A PLEA FOR INTOLERANCE Slavoj Žižek<sup>26</sup> for instance, reasons that democracies actually do need forces to disturb the rules of their game. By declaring all men equal constitutions based on humanist ethics nevertheless define equality according to certain standards which are treated as given (by nature) and thus excluded from further discussion. Such definitions, Žižek claims, always have an exclusive dimension, something or someone will always not fit the bill and thus be tacitly barred from entering the discourse of democracy. According to Žižek, the only way to show what is excluded is what he terms the 'intervention' of an unruly agent who enters the discourse by force, violates the protocol and thereby throws into relief on what tacit assumptions and exclusive standards this discourse is founded. Democracy needs an intimate enemy, and adversary, a Satan within its system, to check the blind spots of its constitution.

As convincing as this argument might sound, René Girard would probably not agree. In his most recent book JE VOIS SATAN TOMBER COMME L'ÉCLAIR the anthropologist puts forward an ardent defense of the democratic revolution of Christian morals.<sup>27</sup> He explicitly rejects the romantic belief in a Satanic cult of individual strength based on a Nietzschean

25. Kodwo Eshun: MORE BRILLIANT THAN THE SUN, Quartet Books, London 1998, p.-004.

26. Slavoj Žižek: A PLEA FOR INTOLERANCE / PLÄDOYER FÜR INTOLERANZ. Passagen Verlag, Wien, 2001.

27. René Girard: JE VOIS SATAN TOMBER COMME L'ÉCLAIR, Paris, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle 1999.

rejection of the 'slave morality' of consensus oriented societies. Girard agrees with Nietzsche that Christianity replaced the cult of the strong with the sympathy for the victims as the principle on which society rests. He disagrees, however, that this sympathy for the victims is an ideological lie. On the contrary, Girard dismantles the romantic transfiguration of the Satanic principles of rivalry, violence and death as an ideological dissimulation of social injustice. He understands the old testament to introduce Satan as a representative of the principle of competition in society. Satan turns people into rivals by making them wish to possess what their neighbours have. This rivalry gradually becomes a war of all against all. At the point, however, when the individual conflicts threaten to blow society apart, Satan emerges again, this time in the guise of the public prosecutor. He now identifies one person as being guilty for all ills the rivalry has brought over society. Through the naming of the scapegoat the energies invested in individual conflicts are redirected against one common target. The war of all against all is turned into the war of all against one. The scapegoat is killed in a feast which unites the community in a shared orgiastic experience. Then the cycle starts all over again.

Girard credits the early Christians with being the first ones brave enough to end this cruel ritual. It just took a simple act. In fact, the magic of the devil ends when someone stays sober enough throughout the killing of the scapegoat (in this case Christ) to realize on the morning after the feast: We killed the wrong one. If this witness then has the courage to make his insight public and convince the people of their mistake, the devil is done for. The injustice cloaked over by the ideological lie of the scapegoat's guilt is exposed. The game is over. It is this simple insight that the wrong ones are being killed which has since then provided one of the strongest arguments to delegitimize tyrannic power politics.

So what are we to think of the devil in the current political situation? On the one hand it seems we desperately need a devil to contest and clarify the principles of democracy at a point where the phrase 'democracy' has become a thin disguise for pushing through capitalist interests and a readymade reason for waging war. On the other hand it is also evident that the Satanic ideology of the scapegoat analyzed by Girard is at play in global politics when competing capitalist nations are asked by a self-proclaimed public prosecutor to direct their united forces against a man identified as the source of all evil. The romantic cult of the strong and ruthless might meet its limits at a point at which the more pressing task is to insist that the wrong ones are being killed.

Casco Issues #9:

PAST IMPERFECT

Compiled & edited  
by Bik Van der Pol  
and Lisette Smits, 2005

Concept: Bik Van der Pol

Research: Liesbeth Bik,  
Jos van der Pol, Lisette Smits  
and Will Holder

Design: Will Holder

Texts: Guus Beumer,  
Bik Van der Pol, Will Bradley,  
Jason Coburn, Stuart Comer,  
Steve Rushton, Jan Verwoert, a.o.

Editor-in-chief: Lisette Smits

Final editing: Emily Pethick

Print: Raddraaier, Amsterdam  
Printed in the EU  
Edition: 1000

Casco, office for Art,  
Design and Theory  
Oudegracht 366  
3511 PP Utrecht  
The Netherlands  
Ph +31 30 2319995  
Fax +31 30 2319995  
[www.cascoprojects.org](http://www.cascoprojects.org)



REVOLVER

Archiv für aktuelle Kunst  
Fahrgasse 23  
D- 60311 Frankfurt/Main  
Germany  
Ph + 49 69 446362  
Fax + 49 69 94412451  
[www.revolver-books.de](http://www.revolver-books.de)

Disclaimer:

In making PAST IMPERFECT  
we have quoted images and  
texts taken from various re-  
sources. Information concerning  
the original authors and source  
have been credited as detailed  
as possible. Despite these efforts,  
some sources nevertheless could  
not be identified. Please contact  
the editor in case of questions  
or objections.

The ideas and opinions revealed  
in the quoted material, do not  
express ideas and opinions  
of the editors, unless stated  
otherwise.

Casco / Lisette Smits  
and Bik Van der Pol, ed.  
ISSN 1385-9064  
ISBN 3-86588-218-8

All rights reserved.

PAST IMPERFECT has been  
generously supported by:  
Mondriaan Foundation,  
Amsterdam; City Council  
of Utrecht; Fonds voor  
Beeldende Kunst, Vormgeving  
en Bouwkunst, Amsterdam;  
Prins Bernhard Fonds;  
Cultuurfonds Andersson Elffers  
Felix, Utrecht and CBK, Centre  
for Visual Arts, Rotterdam

The project PAST IMPERFECT  
by Bik Van der Pol was con-  
ceived at Casco, office  
for Art, Design and Theory  
in November 2003.

Parts of the research have been published  
earlier in: LIFE, ONCE MORE. FORMS  
OF REENACTMENT IN CONTEMPO-  
RARY ART, Sven Lüticken ed., Witte de  
With, Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam  
2005. PAST IMPERFECT,  
Bik Van der Pol, Secession, Vienna, 2005

Photography colour pages  
Unknown  
Image taken from [www.corbis.com](http://www.corbis.com)