

BOOK REVIEW: Satanic Panic: Pop Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s

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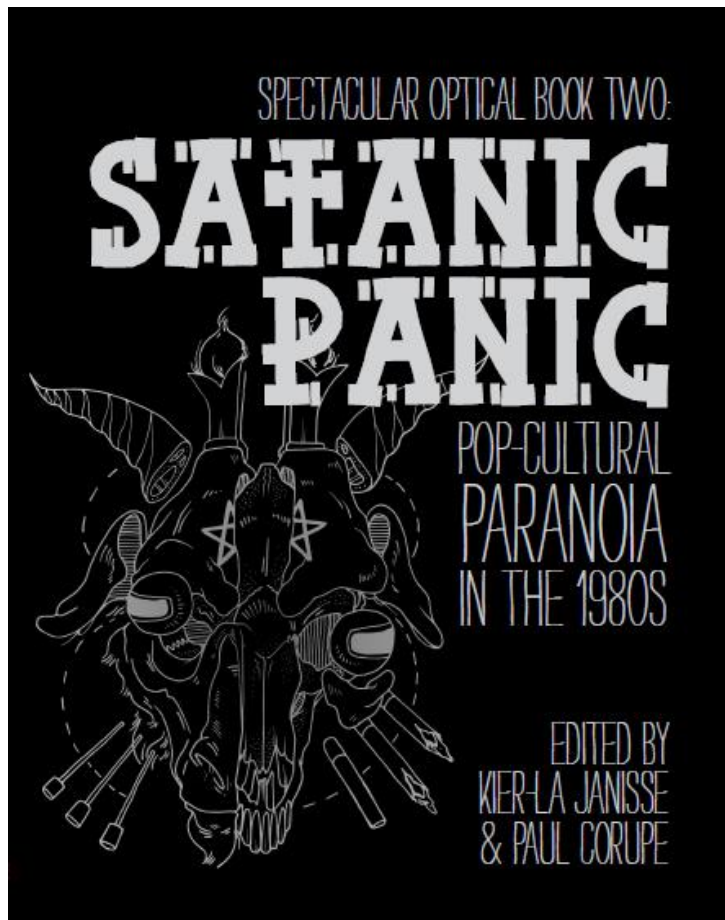
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Satanic Panic: Pop Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s

Ed. Kier-La Janisse & Paul Corupe (2015) Spectacular Optical Publications
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Review by Diane Rodgers

Those around in the 1980s may well remember hysteria about 'video nasties' and the fevered destruction of records in America bearing the (then new) Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics label, fuelled by fears of a pervading obsession with evil amongst youth and popular culture. *Satanic Panic* studies this moral frenzy from a vast array of perspectives in fascinating depth, outlining the fears of anxious parents and a confused mainstream culture about teens supposedly embroiled in Satanic cults and potentially carrying out ritual abuse, devil worship, suicide or murder at any given moment.

Following the rise of interest in the occult from the 1960s onward, it's easy to see why Reagan's America, still reeling from the confusion of Vietnam and the implications for the 'American Dream', morality and family values, latched onto something so easily sensationalised as a scapegoat to blame for all of society's problems. *Satanic Panic* builds this picture brilliantly throughout; each chapter looks at a different aspect of pop-culture - specific films, comics, music, TV, RPGs, infamous trials, MTV, home video, evangelists and preachers, but never dwells on already well-trodden subjects; the editors have gone to some lengths to find plenty of material covering new ground.

Films like *Evilspeak* (1981) and *976-EVIL* (1988) consider adult anxieties fantasised onto youth culture and their apparent susceptibility to 'techno devilry'. Kevin Ferguson suggests that the real hidden fear is the invasion of telephone and computer technology in the home. Role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) are case studies which faced significant and widespread criticism from Christian detractors who saw the gaming community as "a Satanic conspiracy threatening society". Gavin Baddeley (once offered an honorary priesthood by Anton LaVey) discusses an outspoken D&D detractor Christian personality William Schnoebelen who, by his own admission, used to be a Satanist and a vampire before becoming 'born again' and evangelising on the evils of RPGs. More often than not, here and throughout the book, it is shown to be these detractors (rather than the

merely rebellious teen participants), who believe in the power of the supernatural and the evils of magic in a very real way and thus cause plenty of harm themselves.

Paul Corupe covers the Christian comic art of Jack T. Chick who, amongst many dubious choices, gave a platform to controversial figure Dr. Rebecca Brown who lost her medical licence in 1984 for misdiagnosing patients (blaming sickness on demon manifestations and witchcraft, amongst other causes), suffering herself from paranoid schizophrenia and demonic delusions. *Satanic Panic*'s host of writers (including experts, enthusiasts and academics) frequently argue the case successfully; the loudest detractors of the 'Satanic Panic' were actually often the ones causing damage, and usually in their pursuit for fame, greed or notoriety. There are serious cases here; that of Michelle Smith and her notorious *Michelle Remembers* memoir (1980), co-written by therapist Dr. Lawrence Pazder, about Satanic ritual abuse, detailing physical, psychological and sexual torture. From the evidence Alexandra Heller-Nicholas gives, Pazder cashed in on and sensationalised what may have been a far more unremarkable but no less tragic case of child abuse. The infamous case of Ricky Kasso (who savagely murdered a fellow teen in 1984) is also highlighted for discussion, influential on films like *River's Edge* (1986) and songs by bands like Sonic Youth (*Satan is Boring*, 1985).

It is easy to forget the size of such a moral panic from almost 40 years ago, but Joshua Benjamin Graham's 'Fundamentalist readings of occult in cartoons of the 1980s' is a reminder of its full extent; it seems laughable now that worry about violence and Satanism was so widespread at the time that people thought a cartoon He-Man calling on the power of Greyskull actually meant that "our children are being taught by TV today to call on demons...!" Stacy Rusnak's perceptive analysis of the demonization of MTV details battles over (American) family values and moral issues like abortion, pornography and drugs and how the explosion of music video was challenging to the dominant hegemony. Rusnak explains how MTV gave strong anti-authoritarian representation to the jeans, leather jacket and shaggy hair generation and thus became a target in itself for Tipper Gore and other wives of high-ranking members of Congress who founded the Parent's Music Resource Centre (PMRC); "as though MTV was more accountable for America's children than the parents".

A centrepiece to the book, and the entire Satanic moral panic itself, is Alison Lang's chapter on the Geraldo Rivera TV special *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground* (1988). Most chapters in the book at least refer to this inflammatory show, due to its notoriety and influence on the outrage of the time, which the New York Times described as an "obscene masquerade". From Lang's description, Rivera's programme sounds like Chris Morris' *Brasseye Paedogeddon!* special (2001), an intentionally outrageous parody of tabloid TV on yet another moral panic of the modern age. However, this doesn't make Rivera's reportage any less shocking. His scandalous claim of 1 million practising Satanists in America carrying out sex abuse pornography and satanic ritual abuse (which Lang points out was a phenomenon since debunked by FBI) was entirely unsubstantiated. Rivera uses no scientific or academic evidence for his claims, but rather conjecture, opinion and bullying to extract rapid fire soundbites from his guests, requesting they use words of "... no more than two syllables - we're dealing with an audience with the mental capacity of 13-year-olds here". From contemptuous to downright offensive, Lang summarises Rivera's show as hilarious and troubling; pure sensationalist 'entertainment'.

Many chapters in the book concern music, film or pure pulp fiction that were intended as such 'exploitation', cashing in on the easily sensationalised, but the outrage and hysteria caused are clearly where the danger lies in *Satanic Panic*. The book is a mine of information with plenty of full-page images, posters and stills to whet your appetite further, with a deliciously glossy set of full colour images at the back. Topics cover everything relevant from the kitsch, fun and tabloid to sincerely perceptive and philosophical, I already have a rapidly growing must-see list of films, comics and TV specials to follow up next!

It is important to remember seriously, however, that for every perceptive adult that sees such a movement of purported Satanism as merely a teenage "... rejection against the standards their parents represent..." (as Leslie Hatton quotes Revered Graham Walworth, a pastor local to the Ricky Kasso case), there will be an outraged Tipper Gore or fundamentalist group looking for something or someone to blame for all societal problems. Lisa Ladoucer, writing about the PMRC and heavy metal, cites the devastating case of the West Memphis Three. Three teenagers were tried, convicted and jailed for almost 20 years, for the murder of three young boys, based on no real evidence other than a suspicion that one of the teens may be a devil worshipper as he had expressed interest in metal music and the occult; new DNA evidence led to their release in 2011. That, Ladoucer writes, "...is the power of Satan."