

Jan Ijäs

House of the Wickedest Man in the World

Jan Ijäs's *House of the Wickedest Man in the World* (2023) is not actually part of his *Waste* series, which explores how something valuable turns into something useless, but it shows a similar curiosity about things going wrong. The central character of the film tends to evoke strong emotions: Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), a mountaineer, poet, painter and occultist, was called 'the wickedest man in the world' by the contemporary press, while Crowley himself preferred the more apt sobriquet *the Beast 666*. As noted in the film, Crowley was one of the early celebrities whose every move was followed closely. The sensational headlines enhanced Crowley's reputation but also drove him into practical difficulties.

The actual subject of Ijäs's film, however, is the *house* of the beastly priest: the Abbey of Thelema, founded by Crowley in the small town of Cefalú on the north coast of Sicily in 1920. Activities in the Abbey were short-lived as after the unfortunate death of one of Crowley's followers, Mussolini expelled Crowley, and authorities whitewashed over the occult murals that adorned its interior surfaces. The house fascinates modern urban explorers and, though it is quite modest in its proportions, it is presented alternately as beautiful and terrifying in the material shot by Ville Piippo and Ijäs. The shots search for Crowley's spirit or other mystical spirits, but they also capture Cefalú's daily life along the way: ordinary Sicilians running errands in the streets and squares and lying in their swimming pool. The music composed by Lauri Ainala, Vilunki 3000 and Juho Liukkonen intensifies the atmosphere and reminds us that music, like magic, has the potential to affect its environment and change its essence into something completely different.

A recap of the history of the Abbey of Thelema is peppered with quotes from the diaries of Crowley and his entourage. Extreme life is part of a cult leader's job description, but *sex magick*, drugs and channelling creativity into wickedness require dedication and endurance. The diary entries document a planned routine of drug use: a sniff of cocaine before lunch, followed by several sins. The members of the cult are also put to the test: Poupée, the daughter that Crowley had with Leah Hirsig, dies, but soon after Ninette Shumway gives birth to his daughter Astarte Lulu Panthea.

One object of dedication, alongside magic, is art. Halfway into the film, the murals mentioned earlier – or what remains of them – take on the starring role. Crowley admired Paul Gauguin and was greatly inspired by the paintings and panels in Gauguin's 'House of Pleasure' ('Maison du Jouis') in Tahiti. Crowley hoped that by imitating Gauguin's exile from bourgeois society, Gauguin's spirit might touch the occultist. Current discourse has focused critical attention on how Gauguin abused the local community, especially its underage girls. While Gauguin discovered a new world in Tahiti that he used in his art, Crowley and his community seem to have built the Abbey of Thelema to be a secluded and separate reality, which must have increased suspicions among the people of Cefalú and fed into the lore of the evil spirits of the house.

As Mary Douglas (1966/2003, 129–130) writes in her classic work of anthropology *Purity and Danger*, the magic of primitive ritual creates harmonious worlds, which "far from being meaningless [...] gives meaning to existence". The diary entries quoted in Ijäs's film illustrate how the distinction between rituals and routines is blurred. Harmless remarks like "It's been a very lazy day for me" or "a rather amusing day touching up pictures" might be accompanied by poltergeist sightings or the poem *Leah in Plain Figures*, into which Crowley crammed all the obscenities he could think of. We get a picture of tension between occultism and daily life, magic, destruction and work, in which human ambition and the thirst for success also play a not insignificant part. It is impossible, really, to separate occultism from daily life, as Crowley's magical rituals could go on for months, even years, and, at the same time, they turned 'daily life' and 'reality' into a part of the ritual itself (Kakko 2020, 38). Or, as Crowley himself put it in his writings: "Every act must be a ritual, an act of worship, a sacrament" (Crowley 2017).

Insofar as occultism is inseparable from the mundane, a filmmaker is able to focus on one of the two things in his interpretation: he can either notice the banal and be amused by it, which is what Ijäs does, or embrace the magic, which was Kenneth Anger's approach. In the film's epilogue, the Abbey of Thelema is visited by two explorers in 1955, when it had been slumbering, abandoned for more than 20 years: young Anger, who had just made *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), a ritualistic film inspired by Crowley, and sexologist Alfred Kinsey, whose research revolutionised the notion of modern sexuality. More things are about to go wrong: Anger and Kinsey uncover some of Crowley's murals and witness the Abbey's spirits wreaking havoc. Anger even wrote to Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque française about his plans to make a spectacular film in colour about a black magic ceremony at the Abbey of Thelema, but the film either disappeared or was never completed.

It is probably no coincidence that it was the obscene poem *Leah in Plain Figures* that ended up as part of the murals in the Temple of Thelema: the profane can be studied with the same seriousness as the sacred. Kinsey claims that he does not know much about Crowley's occultism, but he is interested in *wickedness*. What is the relationship between wickedness and science? The French philosopher Georges Bataille, who wrote essays about death and eroticism, criticised Kinsey's research for ignoring the complexity and ambiguity of sexual life: by exonerating our sexual life from every trace of guilt

science has no chance of seeing it for what it is (Bataille 1957/1986, 162). Kinsey may have taken Crowley' ritual sex practices as one possible way to approach the subversive, primitive power of sexuality. Then, of course, it is not so much about science as it is about magic – and the house of the beast as a space for magic.

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Literature

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