DIABOLICAL DEMARCATIONS: LANDSCAPE AND “ANTI-LANDSCAPE” IN THE BLOOD ON SATAN’S CLAW

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Director Piers Haggard’s upbringing on a farm profoundly influenced the look and feel of the landscape in *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*. In contrast to the heightened, impressionistic settings of Hammer’s films, *Satan’s Claw* presents a landscape that is much more “a world we are living in” than “a scene we are looking at” (Wylie 1). It is a film intimately concerned with the rural landscape as a worked, habitable space, one where there is a tangible “haptic materiality” to the earth as a pliable, physical material (Newland 167). The cinematography of the pre-credits sequence makes this clear with “the camera in the furrow [signifying] what’s coming up from down below” (Haggard).

This attention to working and managing the land is present throughout the film. Haggard’s representation of the countryside is characterised by notions of ownership, form, and function. The film is set in the early eighteenth century at a point shortly before the advent of the Industrial and Agrarian Revolutions, so this focus feels entirely appropriate given that, even as late as 1900, one in ten workers in Britain was still engaged in agricultural work (Payne 6).

The landscape in *Satan’s Claw* illustrates a nascent, if accelerating, imposition of human control over the form and function of the countryside in the form of strip-farming, footpaths, hedgerows, and animal pens. Older pre-agricultural societies made no distinction between landscapes; it was the development of cultivation and the domestication of animals that led to the subsequent categorisation of land into the cultivated and uncultivated. The prevailing opinion until the
eighteenth century was that cultivated land was far preferable to uncultivated land because it demonstrated order, intelligence and structure (Newland 168). This sat at the very centre of Mediaeval and Early Modern thought.

Paul Newland has read the contrast between the open fields and the demarcated pens outside the Banham house within the historical context of enclosure—the practise of seizing smallholdings and consolidating them into larger farms that moved land from common to private ownership (168). Enclosure was a common, although often controversial, practice in England from the early sixteenth century until into the nineteenth century. It fundamentally changed not only English society, by transferring more direct control over larger tracts of land to a smaller number of affluent landowners, but also the English landscape: enclosure took land that had been shared in common for centuries and contained and demarcated it into private smallholdings (Hoskins 166). These forms of control and demarcation—straight lines of hedgerows and hawthorn bushes—would become a frequent sight across the English landscape by the early eighteenth century and are evident in Satan’s Claw, from the hawthorn used to crown Cathy.
(Wendy Padbury) to the hedgerows in which Reverend Fallowfield (Anthony Ainley) is found hunting for snakes.

Conferring function through agriculture, or ownership through boundaries, characterises the countryside as an environment subordinated to human use and defined only by how it is exploited as a resource. This is an illustration of the classical attitude to the landscape in which “the creation of livable [sic] spaces and usable spaces is a mark of civilisation. Human use confers meaning on space” (Short 6).

The classical attitude extends beyond the spatial and into the temporal, as it also sees human activity as a progressive linear trajectory of improvement. As such, the shaping of the landscape to suit human requirement is a positive act. The early eighteenth century saw the flowering of the Enlightenment, when philosophy moved away from divine revelation and towards a more anthropocentric worldview that celebrated the human ability to comprehend nature through reason. Enlightenment thought is frequently espoused by the Judge (Patrick Wymark), whether sneering at the villagers’ superstitions or decrying the Doctor’s (Howard Goorney) beliefs in witchcraft. His acceptance of the fiend only comes through reasoned examination. The classical approach, and Enlightenment reasoning, together suggest an inevitable and positive move from chaos to order, from abandonment to control, and from the untamed to the managed.

However, Satan’s Claw sees this classically constructed and managed landscape under threat. The pre-credits sequence teases at these anxieties. The shot of Cathy calling to Ralph (Barry Andrews) from across the fields demonstrates how vast the countryside is and how diminished they appear to be within it. This sense of “comprehensive dispossession and vacancy” is the first indicator that
man is not master of nature (Hutchings 29). Given the sheer scale of the landscape, those marks of land management—the ploughed furrows and animal pens—appear small and insignificant. Consequently, civilisation itself, as the owner of the cultivated space, is reduced in authority and potency. The effect of this distancing and reducing is “a shift in perception [of the landscape] from the idyllic to the ominous” (Johnston). Earlier, the camera was positioned in the furrow looking up at Ralph, “as if the earth is glaring up at him” (Scovell 19). The cinematography codes the countryside as a vast but watchful environment, one that is at best dispassionate and at worst hostile towards its human occupants.

The rural landscape becomes what Peter Hutchings has termed an “anti-landscape,” a “landscape that provocatively throws into question the very idea of the human … as the owner of landscape, as a figure in that landscape, or as an observer of it” (29). Hutchings asserts that the otherness of the anti-landscape becomes emphasised to the point that it displaces the agency of people and civilisation, “with the human either completely disappearing or becoming subject to uncontrollable impulses or compulsions, or regressing to something that is less than human” (29). This is an apt description of Satan’s Claw, in which human agency is diminished within a vast natural topography, the village children are drawn away to enact brutal rituals in the forest wilderness, and individuals are compelled to sacrifice their selves to resurrect an atavistic horror.

The forest wilderness is demarcated as separate from the cultivated space, sitting at a point beyond the impositions of civilisation. This separation allows the fiend and its followers to use the woodland as they wish and effect different structures, demarcations and notions of ownership.

The film implies that the forest was not always such a forsaken topography. The presence of the ruins suggest that the forest was once part of the occupied and
managed space. The film does not elaborate further, and as such their presence is ambiguous and open to interpretation. They could suggest a fundamental change to the demarcation of the forest, as a space once managed and defined through human use but long since abandoned. Or they could indicate an alternative social and topographical structure, one that demarcated the landscape according to fiendish worship. In this latter case, the fiend’s re-occupation of the space would represent a return to a previous ownership and a restoration of its historic function.

The cult’s adoption of the ruins as a sacred space is suggestive of the traditions of nature worship in Classical antiquity that considered the physical landscape to be occupied by *genii locorum*, guardian spirits that were worshipped for the protection they offered. The majority were associated with natural features such as mountains, trees, springs and caves, and the veneration of these spirits saw, by extension, the veneration of the place protected by the spirit. *Satan’s Claw* demonstrates both the demarcation of the wilderness into sacred sites, and this numinous sense of the landscape mapped as a series of sacred spaces.
The desacralisation of these spaces following Christianisation saw a reorientation of civilisation’s outlook in the Mediaeval period onto the Church, located at the urban centre, surrounded by the occupied and cultivated landscapes, with the abandoned wilderness now at the margins. The wilderness, no longer a sacred space, over time ceases to be familiar and instead becomes associated with mystery and threat, with the former spiritual guardians now perceived as malign, haunting presences. As such, the former sites of pagan worship became regarded as places of danger, as the homes of monsters, or the sites for executions and violent death (Legard 368-70). We see this pattern of movement from the sacred periphery to the sacred centre very clearly in Satan’s Claw, with Fallowfield’s church usurping the sacred function while the ruins become the locus for dangerous rituals and the home of the fiend.

Until the eighteenth century, the uncultivated wilderness was feared as a place beyond human reach. It was thought to have the power to “uncivilise” people and draw them away from society. Those who spent too long in the wilderness ran the risk of becoming part of it; isolated within these large and remote landscapes, individuals could regress to savage, uncivilised behaviours (Short 9). This pre-Modern fear of the wilderness is brought to life in Satan’s Claw as we see characters led away from the village to join the cult in the forest.

The depiction of the landscape as something awesome and fearful sits in the romantic tradition, which perceives the wilderness as having a “purity which human contact tends to sully and degrade” (Short 9). The space untouched by civilisation is to be revered in a manner reminiscent of the pagan nature worship of antiquity, as it represents a historic, idyllic past. The romantic perception has gained traction in the modern period, as the wilderness has been transformed over time from a vast and encroaching landscape to an environment under threat
from human encroachment. Rather than representing a fearful absence of civilised authority, the wilderness is celebrated precisely because of this absence.

Where the village and the fields are defined by the landscape being mapped according to the classical tradition, the forest wilderness is organised according to the romantic tradition. Nature becomes a space of veneration once again, as we see when Cathy is crowned with hawthorn, led in procession to the ruins and then ritually raped and murdered to help the fiend restore its body. Margaret’s (Michele Dotrice) reading of the “Book of Behemoth” during this sequence—invoking the fiend to “rise now from the forests, from the furrows”—casts it as a revenant *genii locorum*, re-sacralising the wilderness and sustaining the social hierarchy of the cult (Evans-Powell 36). The fiend’s return, and a restoration of the wilderness as a numinous space, suggests a backward-looking and regressive attitude, at odds with the progressive outlook that has fashioned and driven the cultivated space. As such it refutes the tenets of the Enlightenment—its elevation of man’s capacity for reason and narrative of inevitable improvement. Instead, it implies that these notions upon which modern civilisation has been founded are fundamentally unsound.
The relationship between classical landscape and romantic anti-landscape is more complex, however. Rather than separate and distinct, the two enjoy a considerable degree of permeability, catalysed by the fiend’s unearthing. That moment of emergence is symbolic of this perviousness between the landscape and anti-landscape. While coded as a revenant spirit of the wilderness, the fiend does not emerge from the forest but is instead ploughed up from the field. Its appearance out of the cultivated earth challenges the notion of humanity as the owner and manager of the rural landscape and implicates the cultivated earth itself as an agent in its return, suggesting a sentience and hostility towards its human managers (Macfarlane).

The fiend steps outside the demarcation between landscape and anti-landscape. Where Ralph, Cathy, and the other villagers are diminished by the scale and ubiquity of the rural landscape—their autonomy to operate within it restricted by notions of land use and occupation—the fiend appears to move freely, a freedom it grants to its followers, who show no fear in occupying the forest or, in the case of Angel (Linda Hayden), appearing naked within the church. The fiend transgresses notions of ownership and function, operating across cultivated land, the wilderness, and the farmhouse without care or consideration for social hierarchy or use of space. Civilisation and how it constructs meaning for itself through ownership, function, and demarcation, are mocked by the fiend’s ability to move anywhere and inflict trauma. As a result, the certainty that civilisation has over its ownership and mastery of the cultivated space is exposed as flawed and hubristic. The fiend’s actions transform the landscape into an anti-landscape, “a realm that snags, bites and troubles,” marked by repulsive objects, sites of abandonment, and savage behaviours (Macfarlane).

The fiend’s origination from the earth, a space traditionally gendered as female— in opposition to the patriarchal socio-political structures of the civilised spaces of cultivation and habitation—marks it as symbolic of the ancient and abject
feminine. The relationship the fiend has with its followers—demarcating parts of their bodies with fur—is analogous to what Barbara Creed and others have identified as the mother’s instrumental role in mapping the infant body during childhood, zoning the body into clean and unclean areas. Where the mother zones the infant body to identify and remove the uncleanliness, the fiend does the opposite: its actions are to create areas of unclean fur and remove the areas of cleanliness. There is a clear parallel in the film between the demarcations of landscape and anti-landscape, and the zoning of the bodies of the children between clean and unclean.

The fiend’s awakening from beneath the very land we cultivate demonstrates the fallacy of our mastery over nature, the inherent fragility of civilisation, and the lurking of our abject selves at our horizons. As Creed states in relation to The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973), but relevant to Satan’s Claw, the abject “can never be successfully obliterated but lies in wait at the threshold of the subject’s identity, threatening it with possible breakdown” (40). As with our bodies, our control of our landscape rests on our ability to suborn it to our needs through constructs of ownership and function. And, as with our bodies, there are watchful threats waiting in the wilderness to resist civilisation and overturn its authority.

For more, check out David Evans-Powell 2021 book on The Blood on Satan’s Claw, part of the Devil’s Advocates series from Auteur Press (Liverpool University Press).
Works Cited

*The Blood on Satan’s Claw.* Directed by Piers Haggard, Tigon British Film Productions, 1971.


