

[Anita Lam](#)

Encounters with the Devil: Devil Fictions and Demonic Writing

- Laurence A. Rickels: *The Devil Notebooks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2008. xiii, 380 S. Paperback. USD 24,95. ISBN: 978-0-8166-5052-1.

[1] Laurence A. Rickels' *The Devil Notebooks* is structured as a series of twenty-six notebooks dealing with various encounters with the Devil in the realm of fiction and mass culture. Although the Devil is immortal, his history is also human history (p. 61), and it is into this history that encounters with the Prince of Darkness fall. These encounters range from Aaron Spelling's made-for-television film *Satan's School for Girls* to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, from Goethe's *Faust* to Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, and from Sigmund Freud's letters and texts (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) to today's (American) news headlines of mass murder. Rickels provides a stunning breadth of examples of Devil fictions from which he develops a Freudian psychoanalytic portrait of the Devil himself. For Rickels, the Devil represents and is modeled on the primal pre-Oedipal father in a child's early development. In contrast to his previous work (*The Vampire Lectures*, 1999) which dealt with the undead or un-Dad, the Devil does not grant the fulfillment of immortality wishes, but instead gives a certain amount of time and the deadline (p. xii). Because the Devil's clients are healthy non-neurotics or psychopaths, they use this finite amount of time, regulated by the presence of the deadline, to create a world of their own making (p. 315).

[2] The format of notebooks allows Rickels to cover a vast range of Devil fictions from the »Hell-raising of middlebrow culture« (p. 126), and also parallels the format of lecture notes from which these notebooks sprung. While Rickels had tested the content of these notebooks through his lectures on numerous undergraduate and graduate students, his audience was unlikely to have extended to students of criminology. Indeed, students of criminology might consider *The Devil Notebooks* to be an instance of demonic writing; in contrast to the straight-forward argumentative style of the social sciences and its use of language as a communicative vehicle of social facts and analysis, Rickels' writing is riddled with »the bad language of pun« (p. 314), jargon and slang that characterizes demonic writing (here understood as Rickels himself understands such writing through Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*). Because the Devil enters social relations through language and the power of the word (p. 70), it is not trivial at this point to discuss Rickels' associative and punning writing style as particularly devilish. As the Devil appears with doubling effects (e.g. the doubling of names or of father-son relationships; p. 29–31), Rickels revels in the doubling effects of his punny wordplay. As Freud used his method of free association to evoke emotionally-charged repressed memories, Rickels uses free association to link his various ideas together. While the thematic ideas gel together through this associative style of writing and investigation, they are not otherwise linked together through the type of sustained argumentative style familiar to the social sciences (for an example, please see the section below). What might make this style of thought additionally inaccessible is its presumption that readers are familiar with Freud's body of work and sufficiently well-versed in Freudian psychoanalytic concepts. This presumption is not necessarily founded, especially when we speak about contemporary North American criminology. Here, Freud is a relatively peripheral figure, mostly making sporadic appearances as a contrast to proponents of rational choice theories, or as a reminder of the dark side

of the civilizing process. If his psychoanalytic techniques are mentioned, they often appear in contrast to the preferred cognitive-behavioural techniques for offender rehabilitation.

[3] However, there are sections within *The Devil Notebooks* that are thought-provoking and of interest to criminologists. As such, the next section of this book review will examine where and how Rickels' work fits into contemporary criminological theory and research, and in particular how the Devil represents a figure of certainty in a world of emotion and uncertainty. In short, the next section aims to explain why Rickels' work might be of use to criminology, and why the book might be recommended to graduate students and faculty members.

[4]

The Devil you know: Criminology and the Devil

[5] While Rickels writes that Devil fictions adhere to the repressed release of violence between or behind the headlines, films and novels (p. 12), what makes his work interesting is less related to these speculations. What makes his work noteworthy lies in his psychoanalytic explanation of why the figure of the Devil is seductive, particularly when his seductive appeal is not necessarily linked to lawbreaking or violent activity (e.g. linked to the creative production and completion of art work). Because the Devil is argued to be modeled on the pre-Oedipal father, he is also a figure of certainty in a child's early development, or is representative of what Rickels designates as »Dad certainty« (p. xi). It is this unconscious sense of certainty embodied in the figure of the Devil that intersects with some of contemporary criminology's conscious preoccupations. This is especially true of two different criminological forays into relatively new territory.

[6] First, cultural criminologists are likely to be attracted to Rickels' attention to the expressive, aesthetic and emotional qualities of the Devil fictions he examines. The rallying methodological cry of cultural criminology [1](#) has been to privilege investigations into the phenomenological experience of committing crime and the emotions associated with it (e.g. anger, pleasure, fear, etc.). Rickels provides an account of the psychoanalytic underpinnings of emotions related not to the committing of crime directly, but to the emotions inspired by the Devil, such as disgust (discussed in relation to science fiction author H.P. Lovecraft's craft of disgust in notebook 10), and the emotionally-laden sins of lust and anger (notebook 6). More importantly, his focus on the Devil as a figure of certainty is provocative precisely because it allows for the examination of a subject that has been marginalized in cultural criminology and criminology in general: the law-abiding citizen. As neither victim nor criminal but potentially both, the law-abiding citizen is the taken-for-granted background entity in the imagination of criminologists, particularly if criminology is defined as the study of crime, criminal and the criminal justice system.

[7] However, the second strand of theory and research addresses the possibility of redefining criminology with the implication of bringing back into the scholarly gaze the figure of the law-abiding citizen. Some scholars have been recently experimenting with redefining criminology as neither the study of crime nor of criminal justice, but as the study of guaranteeing security. [2](#) Rickels' understanding of the Devil fits into this redefinition of criminology by offering a psychoanalytic explanation of the unconscious desire for security, which can be understood as an unconscious yearning for the repetition of the experience of certainty that one first feels as a young child. A young child's experience of the pre-Oedipal father as »Dad certainty« then drives the seductive appeal of the Devil for (mostly law-abiding) adult consumers

of pop cultural products (e.g. Devil fictions).

- [8] To better understand how Rickels' study of the Devil is also conceptually relevant for this redefined criminological enterprise, [3](#) it is worthwhile to work through his network of associations to unravel the links between the figure of the Devil and mechanisms of guaranteeing security/certainty. Specifically, insurance and contract law will be discussed as mechanisms that guarantee a measure of security by governing uncertainty (risk). Because the highlighting of these mechanisms requires a certain amount of the reader's patience, largely due to the unraveling process, it will also double as an example of the non-linear associative style that Rickels employs throughout *The Devil Notebooks* to make his conceptual links.
- [9] Working from Freud's case histories (e.g. The Wolf Man) in which he laid down a path of unconscious associations between feces, babies and the penis, Rickels employs the same network of associations to describe the »smear tactics of certitude« (p. 40). That is, the pre-Oedipal stage of note when discussing early fantasies of the Devil refers to the anal stage. This is the stage in which the earliest and most primitive meaning of feces is understood as the child's first »gift«. [4](#) This »gift« then takes on the meaning of baby through the symbolic and unconscious concept of »little one«. Grounded in this path of associations, Rickels argues that the pre-Oedipal father, on which the Devil is modeled, is considered the agent of the anal theory of birth, and that the young child accepts this theory as certain (p. 43). From this premise, Rickels then argues that the Devil, like the young child, gives birth to the excremental world, a world of sameness that protects us against the natural world of accident (p. 66) or risk.

[10]

Risk Management

- [11] To protect us against this world of risk, we traffic with the Devil through regulatory mechanisms to guarantee a measure of security. First, as Rickels notes, »the Devil is an institutional figure, the kind you negotiate with and bind yourself to by contract that will be observed down to the fine print« (p. 3). If law is the Devil's point of entry (p. 139), which explains the Devil's interest in the legal profession as society becomes increasingly secular, then it is civil law, rather than criminal law, that is privileged as the site of contract with the Devil in this recounting. While Nietzsche also privileges civil law over criminal law, by suggesting that the deeply-rooted contractual relationship between creditor and debtor is as old as the idea of »legal subjects«, [5](#) Rickels implies that law and legal subjectivity occurred in the shadow of the (figure of the) Devil. Since contractual relations presuppose a conscious awareness of the future and a desire to control its uncertainty by regulating its anticipated risks, the terms of contract are subjected to a deadline, which is ultimately what the Devil grants. Following Freud's observation of anal character, it is also only the stickler for correct spelling (e.g. the anal retentive) who can better negotiate with the Devil in these exchanges about the state of letters, since the banality (or b-anality) of evil lies in the contract's fine print. Here, the evil of uncertainty lies in the typo. The typo nullifies the security provided by the contract, in which both parties are able to anticipate possible harms and obligations related to preventing those harms.
- [12] As another regulatory mechanism that papers the surface of consciousness, insurance has also been researched by criminologists as a way to govern risk and uncertainty. [6](#) While the practice of insurance

has been linked to the development of actuarial techniques to calculate risk, particularly as it related to nautical navigation, few scholars have related the institution of insurance to Freudian psychoanalysis. It is in opening up this area of inquiry that Rickels' observations become remarkable, although his observations do follow a circuitous path of associations. He begins with Freud's observation of how »the Devil's gold turns to shit« (p. 43) and the unconscious association between fecal matter and money during the anal stage. These associations in turn are apparent in the association between the Devil and the underworld in legend (e.g. gold mines). As such, mining becomes a primal scene (p. 237), in which ordinary traumatic shocks can take place and did take place, such as in E.T.A. Hoffman's retelling of a sixteenth century mine tragedy in *The Mines of Falun*. Mining train wrecks contributed to the first public forum and form of psychic trauma; and this trauma, with its attendant neuroses, phobias and catastrophe preparedness, was accompanied by the spread of the concept and institution of accident, health and life insurance (p. 243). In short, the underworld of psycho-cultural disorders reached the everyday world of governing practices manifested by insurance and psychoanalysis. What remains to be further mined in the future by theorists is the connection between insurance and the Freudian psychoanalytic understanding of the ego, especially if the double was originally understood by Freud as a form of insurance that the ego had taken out against its own unthinkable mortality (p. 243).

[13] In the end, *The Devil Notebooks* might be of interest to some criminologists – not for its references to showy instances of sex and violence, but for its quieter moments of insight into how the figure of the Devil might be linked to contractual governance, insurance and the unconscious yearning for certainty. Yet these insights require that the reader be prepared to take on the role of miner, ready to dig deep beneath the surface of this infernal text, lest Rickels' »gold« be taken for shit.

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Anmerkungen

- 1 See Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward, Wayne Morrison, and Mike Presdee (Eds.): Cultural Criminology Unleashed. London: Glasshouse Press 2004. [zurück](#)
- 2 Les Johnston and Clifford Shearing: Governing Security: Explorations in Policing and Justice. London: Routledge 2003. [zurück](#)
- 3 Richard Ericson: Crime in an Insecure World. Cambridge: Polity Press 2007. [zurück](#)
- 4 Sigmund Freud: Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume 17. Translated by James Strachey and Anna Freud. London: The Hogarth Press 1953, p. 80. [zurück](#)
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche: On the Genealogy of Morals. New York: Vintage Books 1967. [zurück](#)
- 6 See Ericson: Crime in an Insecure World (note 3) for a summary of some of this research. [zurück](#)