

ISLAND OF DEATH





CAST

ROBERT BEHLING (as 'Bob Belling') as Christopher

JANE LYLE (as 'Jane Ryall') as Celia

JESSICA DUBLIN as Patricia

GERARLD GONALONS as Foster

JANNICE McCONNELL (as 'Janice McConnel') as Leslie
and **NIKO TSACHIRIDIS** as The Shepherd

CREW

Written, Directed and Produced by

NICO MASTORAKIS

Edited by **VASILIS SYROPOULOS** (as 'Bill Syropoulos')

Music by **NICK LAVRANOS**

All songs by **NICO MASTORAKIS** and **NICK LAVRANOS**

Director of Photography **NICK GARDELLIS**



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A CRUEL DESTINATION: THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF ISLAND OF DEATH

by Johnny Walker

WARNING: The following essay contains significant plot spoilers.

The term 'cult' is rarely (if ever) invoked in English-speaking film criticism in reference to Greek cinema. Nico Mastorakis's boundary-pushing exploitation masterpiece, *Island of Death* (*Ta pediá tou Diavólou*, 1976), is therefore somewhat of an anomaly. Banned on video in the United Kingdom between 1984 and 2011 and heavily censored everywhere else, the film comes with a reputation as being one of the most transgressive and violent films ever made.

The story follows two lovers, Christopher (Robert Behling, credited here as 'Bob Belling') and Celia (Jane Lyle, credited as 'Jane Ryall'), who are on the run from the police. Having fled the UK, they arrive on the small Greek island of Mykonos, and proceed, in the name of "the almighty God", to murder anyone who engages in anything remotely hedonistic. Yet the true perverts – of course – are Christopher and Celia. Not only are they an incestuous couple (who, in one of the film's most infamous scenes, have sex in a phone box while calling their mother long distance), they crucify a painter and drown him in whitewash; they burn a woman beyond recognition; they murder a man with a samurai sword; they force a man to fellate a gun barrel before pulling the trigger; they photograph their victims and use the images as masturbatory aids; and, in perhaps the most talked about scene of all, Christopher rapes a goat and then slits its throat. The film is truly bizarre. What could possess someone to make it?

Mastorakis has claimed on numerous occasions that his reasons for making *Island of Death* were purely monetary, and that he was inspired by the worldwide success of Tobe Hooper's low budget US money-spinner *The Texas Chain Saw*



Massacre (1974). Having allegedly taken a mere weekend to write and only 18 days to shoot, *Island of Death* was shot on location in Mykonos for a modest \$30,000 at the beginning of 1975. It was the second film for Mastorakis, who, having worked mostly for Greek television, had recently made a psychic-themed giallo homage, *Death Has Blue Eyes (To koritsi vomva, 1976)*. *Blue Eyes*, while not a box office sensation, did manage to secure international distribution – including in the UK, where it played as part of a double bill with US B-movie *Submission* (aka *Pets*, 1974) – thus proving to financiers that Mastorakis was capable of working in the voguish and highly commercial arena of exploitation cinema.

While Mastorakis may claim to have taken the lead from *Chain Saw* with *Island of Death*, there are few parallels (if any) to be drawn between the two films. In fact, they are both clearly grounded in two different cultural and filmmaking traditions. Indeed, as *Island of Death* went into production, Greek cinema was enjoying somewhat of a minor boom in softcore porn films, which likely offered Mastorakis some inspiration. His film, thus, joined many other sexually explicit exploitation movies that were being shot on out-of-season Greek islands with minimal cast and crew. So while *Island of Death* may have rocked the boat in terms of its violent content and the “perversions” it exhibited, it also sat quite comfortably with Greek films such as *Diamonds on Her Naked Flesh (Diamantia sto gymno sou soma, 1972)*, *Girl of Passion (Erotismos kai pathos, 1974)*, and *The Pervert (O anomalos, 1975)*, which were all provocative in their own ways.

The film is mostly remembered for having been one of 39 videocassettes banned in the United Kingdom during the “video nasty” panic of the 1980s. In fact, the film wasn’t actually known as *Island of Death* until it was released onto UK video by AVI in 1982. Yet, prior to this, it had been shown theatrically in a number of countries, under a variety of different titles, and in a variety of different cuts, to relatively little fanfare. Alternative titles included its original shooting title, *Devils in Mykonos* which it played as in Greece, Germany and Japan; *Cruel Destination* which it played as in Italy; *A Craving For Lust* which it played as in the UK; and *Killing Daylight* and *Isle of Perversion*, which it is said to have played as in the US. In none of these territories did the film generate anything in the way of good box office, nor did the film attract much in the way of controversy. In fact, it could

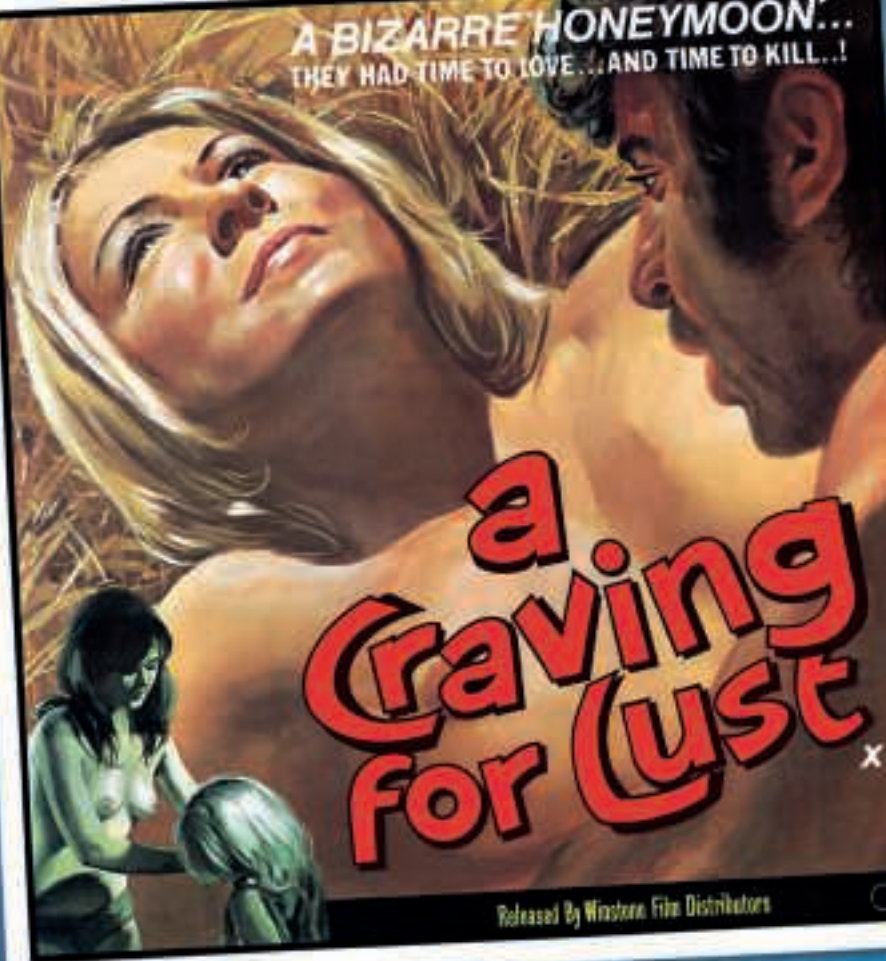
be argued that, should *Island of Death* never have made it onto video in the UK, it may never have garnered the reputation distributors can now boast of it.

It was first seen in Britain in November of 1977. Distributed by Winstone Film Distributors (not GTO as some sources claim), it opened at London’s historic Cinema Moulin as *A Craving for Lust* as part of a double bill with *Her Naked Flesh* (aka *Diamonds on Her Naked Flesh*). But despite performing relatively well in its first week – beating the cinema’s previous week’s takings by £147 – the film only lasted a month, netting a rather flat £5090¹, before being replaced by Tigon’s more successful *Innocent Girls Abroad* (aka *The Innocent Abroad, 1972*). There are a couple of reasons as to why the film was unpopular. First, it was not supported by a particularly large advertising campaign (promotional materials relating to this release are very scarce). Second, the film was lacking some of its more controversial elements having been cut by the BBFC (and may have appeared as being rather anodyne as a consequence). Third – and, in my view, mostly likely – is that its somewhat idiosyncratic mix of erotica and the macabre was maybe too quirky to step out of the shadow of the two other films that the Moulin was offering: the hugely popular *Come Play With Me* (1977) and the blockbusting *Emmanuelle 2* (1975).

Less is known about *Island of Death*’s US distribution history. As mentioned above, some sources have reported that the film was released in America as both *Killing Daylight* and *Isle of Perversion*, but – aside from a collection of lobby cards advertising the latter – I haven’t been able to track down any record of a formal cinema release. In fact, in spite of the film having been heralded as somewhat of a grindhouse classic, neither of its alleged US titles is mentioned in the contemporaneous cinema listings of *The New York Times*, nor do they come up in the pages of other national newspapers such as *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post* or the *Chicago Tribune*. Of course, the film’s absence from these publications does not dictate that it was *never* released, or that it *never* played in the US. In fact, it’s a possibility that the papers in question may have shied away from advertising a film with a title as audacious as *Isle of Perversion*. But its omission remains curious nevertheless, particularly where New York’s

1. Box office data, *Screen International* 119, Dec 24-Jan 31 1978, p. 2

A BIZARRE HONEYMOON...
THEY HAD TIME TO LOVE... AND TIME TO KILL...!



a Craving for Lust



Released By Winston Film Distributors

A GIRL WILL
DO
ANYTHING
FOR
DIAMONDS!

HER NAKED FLESH



42nd Street is concerned, and particularly when it was common for *The Times* to carry ads and/or listings for other X-rated features.

Contrary to the Internet Movie Database, the North American film rights to *Island of Death* were sold to the famous film advertiser Merwin “Merv” Bloch circa 1975, before being handed over to Bryanston Film Distributors, a NYC-based firm with Mafia connections. Bryanston was known throughout the industry, by the mid-1970s, for having funded and distributed the infamous hardcore feature *Deep Throat* (1972), and as having handled a number of other major exploitation titles of the period, including *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Paul Morrissey’s *Flesh for Frankenstein* (1973), and Aldo Lado’s *Night Train Murders* (1975). However, while in 1975 Bryanston was estimated to have generated some \$20 million in gross income in the previous year², by 1976 it was in debt of \$2m following obscenity charges made against it regarding its connections with *Deep Throat*³. By the end of the year, one of Bryanston’s key players, Louis Peraino, was jailed, while his father (and head of the Peraino gang), Anthony (“Big Tony”), fled the US prior to sentencing. These factors would partly explain why *Isle of Perversion* was never distributed under the Bryanston name. Indeed, during Bryanston’s period of financial difficulty, the film was passed on to Cineffects Color Laboratory (another firm connected with the porn industry), which agreed to auction the film reels off in New York on August 23, 1976⁴. However, due to a legal complication, the auction never took place, and the rights to the film sharply reverted back to its original owner, Merv Bloch. Whatever happened to the film after that is, at present at least, a mystery.

In the territories where it was definitely released, the film was hardly ever reviewed. If it was, the critical response was, at worse, mixed, though it was nowhere near as negatively received as its legacy might suggest. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, rather typically, dismissed the film as “routine exploitation”, but the

2. Nicholas Gage, ‘Organized crime reaps huge profits from dealing in pornographic films’, *New York Times*, October 12, 1975, p. 68.

3. Harold Jacobson, ‘Creditors in holding pattern; Grant Peraino’s good intentions in future-reorged Bryanston’, *Variety*, August 18, 1976, p. 3 / 32.

4. No author given, *New York Times*, August 4, 1976, p. 65.

leading trade journal *Screen International* was much more sympathetic. In fact, the reviewer argued that the film was “worthy of better” than the “sexploitation regulars” that it would inevitably go on play to. Indeed, it was suggested that the film could quite easily be set apart from most other exploitation fare of the period, because its “saleable goods” (i.e. its scenes of sex and violence) were “presented in a quality package”. Mastorakis was even singled out as somewhat of an artist with a keen eye who “uses the beautiful scenery of Mykonos to contrast the sunlit peace with the dark turbulence of the minds of his two leading players.” And, whereas exploitation filmmakers were typically dismissed as being talentless hacks, the review suggests that “When Nick Mastorakis has finally established his reputation as a director, this is the film which will be sought after by film buffs”.

The reviewer was half right, I suppose. Mastorakis did go on to bigger and “better” things (including, most notably, *The Greek Tycoon* with Anthony Quinn in 1978), but his subsequent films were never billed as being “From the director of [insert one of *Island of Death*’s many titles here]” – presumably because most people wouldn’t have known what it was. How times have changed.

A Stateside HD release of *Island of Death*? Who’d have thought it? If it is true that the film did not quite reach its intended audience through Bryanston in the 1970s, this can certainly be remedied now (though one does wish that the distributors had taken a leaf out of Christopher’s book and made more effort to document their perverse forays). The film’s distribution history may be murky, but its legacy is crystal clear. So ladies, gentlemen, sisters, mothers, brothers and animal lovers: enjoy (if you can) Greek exploitation’s most famous export.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Lindsey Decker Frank from Syracuse University for forwarding me appropriate articles from *Variety*, and to Laura Mee for sending me the review for *A Craving for Lust* from *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

Johnny Walker is the author of Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre and Society (Edinburgh University Press), co-editor of Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media (Bloomsbury), and founding co-editor of the Global Exploitation Cinemas book series (Bloomsbury).



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Island of Death/Devils in Mykonos has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution by Arrow Films.

The original camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered ArriScan and was graded on the Baselight grading system. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Image stability, density fluctuation and other picture issues were also improved.

At some point in its history, Reel 5 of the original negative was subjected to significant damage, the result of the sustained presence of solvent solution within the roll convolutions that could not evaporate inside the film can. This directly impacted the colour shift and prematurely brought about acetic decay of the element as evident from off-gassing and carrier distortion/warping. Because of this, careful and extensive film repairs had to be undertaken before scanning could take place.

Tests were taken on both the ArriScan and Spirit DataCine before the decision was made to scan this reel on the ArriScan manually without pin-registration, which would have risked damaging the element further. No other suitable print or pre-print elements for *Island of Death* could be found to substitute for this damaged material.

For this reason, the overall condition of Reel 5 stands out against the rest of the film, with regular occurrences of density fluctuation, flicker, and discolouration as well as noticeable dirt, debris and scratches. There are also a few points during this reel where frames had been lost due to this damage, and we have inserted these frames from a previous SD transfer to make these sections complete.

Extensive repairs were also carried out throughout the entire feature to reset the original failing cement joins (which had deteriorated over time) and replace old laboratory/facility repairs with ones suitable for restoration. Particularly large tears were fixed in Reels 2, 4 and the latter section of 5.

The original front titles have also been lost, so these have been recreated from reference materials to approximate the original opening of the film as closely as possible. The alternative front titles for *Devils in Mykonos* and *Island of Perversion* have also been recreated from original reference materials and have been made available to view separately.

The original mono soundtrack version was transferred by the filmmaker prior to Arrow's work on this restoration, and as such still exhibits some instances of bumps, clicks and audible buzz, in keeping with the condition of the materials.

Audio synch will appear loose at times due to select actor's voices being recorded in post-production.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films.

Restoration services by Deluxe Restoration, London

Film Inspection & Repair: Marie Fieldman

Film Scanning: Paul Doogan, Bob Roach

Film Grading: Stephen Bearman

Restoration Supervisors: Tom Barrett, Clayton Baker

Restoration Technicians: Debi Bataller, Dave Burt, Lisa Copson, Tom Wiltshire

Restoration Management: Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones

Title Creation: Marc Morris

Special Thanks to Director Nico Mastorakis for his assistance on this restoration.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Ewan Cant

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

Technical Producer: James White

QC and Proofing: Ewan Cant, Anthony Nield

Subtitling: IBF

Authoring: David Mackenzie

Artist: Graham Humphreys

Design: Jack Pemberton

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