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A Strutting Pantomime

When Ken Russell's *The Devils* was released in 1971, it had already suffered a considerable mauling at the hands of the British Board of Film Censors and its production company Warners, both of whom loathed it. It was then savaged by the vast majority of the critics, who disliked not only its physical explicitness (no surprises there, then) but its entire visual style. Thus, for example, George Melly in the *Observer* dismissed it as 'vulgar, camp and hysterical' whilst Derek Malcolm in the *Guardian* called it 'vulgar, garish, tuppence coloured, mock cynical, exhibitionistic - a strutting pantomime of a movie that sets you up for a kick in the teeth, then pinches your backside instead'. The general consensus was that Russell had betrayed a serious historical subject by treating it in an utterly unsuitable (not to say unsubtle) manner. This paper will attempt to unravel the unspoken critical assumptions underlying the reviews ('vulgar' in particular speaks volumes) in order to demonstrate that the realist aesthetic was still alive and kicking in critical circles in 1971. And maybe it still is, since not one mainstream critic has come forward to condemn Warners for refusing to re-release *The Devils*, one of the greatest British films ever made, now that it has at long last been restored to its unexpurgated state.