

Horror Reverie 2:
An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of *The Exorcist*

TRANSCRIPT

Panel 1 – Historical and Other Contexts

11 March 2023

(duration 54:43)

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

audience, *The Exorcist*, Catholicism, demon, Eileen Dietz, evil, faith, horror film, William Friedkin, Father Karas, *Leap of Faith*, Regan MacNeil, Alexandre O. Philippe, possession, sequels, “Tubular Bells”

00:03

Kristopher [Kris] Woofter

Hi everybody.

00:06

Welcome to this celebration of 50 years of William Friedkin’s influential horror film *The Exorcist*, released the day after Christmas 1973 and spawning several sequels and prequels, a Netflix streaming series, and a slew of imitators including my guilty favorite, the 1990 parody *Repossessed* with Linda Blair and Leslie Nielsen. Masterful film. I’m Kris Woofter editor of *Monstrum* and one of the organizers of this event along with Stacey Abbott, Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Mark Jancovich—hello, Spain!—and Gary Rhodes, who unfortunately couldn't be here today. Horror Reverie was Gary's idea and we'll miss him today. Hopefully, he's doing well. I want to thank Stacey, Lorna and Mark and Gary for their part in bringing this symposium to you today, as well as our graduate research assistant, Marcus Prasad, who's running the Zoom and the tech today.

As with last year, today's symposium features a variety of voices from academics and critics, to actors and industry creators. We have a terrific lineup of speakers for you today, including our featured guest, actress Eileen Dietz, whose face is

iconic in the film as the demon Pazuzu. And in the second session—they'll both be in the second session—but Alexandre O. Philippe, whose film *Leap of Faith* is a terrific account of Friedkin's philosophy and goals in creating *The Exorcist*. Today's symposium is being recorded, as you probably just noticed, and will later be published in *Monstrum*. Our sixth issue, issue one, 6.1, in June of 2023. So June of this year, along with an accompanying transcript, and an original framing text by Marcus Prasad, who's running the symposium. So we'll, we'll have you on our on our mailing list. So, we'll let you know when that is published. You can revisit the the sessions and read the transcripts if you want more of a textual experience. This second iteration of horror reverie is sponsored by the Collective for Research on Epistemologies and Ontologies of Embodied Risk or CORERISC, the Montreal Monstrum society and the journal *Monstrum*. And McGill University's Moving Image Research Lab with funding support from the Fonds de recherche du Quebec. Special thanks to Alanna Thain and Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for their support. Mario is co-coordinator of the Montreal Monstrum society with me.

Before we begin, and because we're recording today's symposium, we'll just ask that everybody in the audience, keep cameras off and keep yourselves muted, so you can sneeze or stumble or drop things, so you won't interrupt the sessions. And also if you have questions for the speakers, if you could send them as a direct message to the chair of the panel. That would be great. Our chairs today are Stacey Abbott for panel one.

03:52

And I don't know if Stacey is going to pop on jus—well you'll, she'll be on in a moment anyway. There she is. And Anna Bogutskaya for Panel 2—Anna we'll be conducting a discussion with Eileen and Alexandre. And Lorna Piatti-Farnell for panel three—there's Lorna. Stacy, Anna and Lorna will introduce themselves and their panelists before each panel and there will be time for Q&A afterward. There will also be a short 10-minute break between panels two and three. So that would be from 12:50 to 1pm, Eastern time, I guess. 5:50 to 6pm, UK. Yeah. And much earlier in on the West Coast. Okay, so I'm, that's all I

have to say. And I'm looking forward to hearing what the panelists have to say thank you.

04:54

Stacey Abbott

Thank you. Thanks, Kris. Thanks for that introduction. As Kris says, I'm Stacey Abbott, and I'm really privileged to be able to chair this panel on historical and other contexts. So I'm looking forward to discussing the film with our great panelists. So I'm going to introduce each of the speakers, they're going to do their presentations, and then we'll save questions for the end. So I'm going to move straight along and introduce our first speaker. Amy C. Chambers is a senior lecturer in Film and Media Studies in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research examines intersections of entertainment media, and the public understanding of science. And she has published on medical horror in *The Exorcist* and representations of women scientists in film and TV. And she's currently co-authoring a monograph called *Reading Science Fiction: Sociality, Publics and Pleasures*. And she'll be talking to us today about "Somewhere Between Science and Superstition: Religious Outrage, Horrific Science and *The Exorcist*." So I'm gonna hand over to Amy, thank you.

06:00

Amy C. Chambers

Thank you very much for that kind introduction, Stacy. So if you just bear with me for a moment while I just do the Zoom dance, right? So I'm just going to put on a timer so that I vaguely keep to our agreed 10 minute slot. And we are go. Okay. Hello. So, I'm going to be talking to you about some research that I did, working with the Catholic Church, the United States Communion of Catholic Bishops, specifically, part of a project where I was looking at the intersections between the religious groups that had been part of the censorship of Hollywood between 1936 and 1968. And the representations of science that came after the end of censorship. So I was really interested in looking at how religious groups, especially the Catholic Church, negotiated representations of science, once they had lost any sort of control over the types of images that

were being produced. So the US Catholic Church are part of a group of religious groups who are involved in censoring, essentially, Hollywood cinema from the early 1930s, through to officially 1968, although their system had very much begun to break down in the light in the late 1950s. And into the 60s with films like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which was released without sort of the full agreement of the production code administration.

So *The Exorcist* is coming out in the early 1970s, well after the end of the production code, and so when I went to do my research, I was really looking at very specifically science fiction, and science based narratives, not expecting to look at *The Exorcist* at all. And there's a brilliant archive at the Catholic University of America, which as a British person sounds terribly made up. But the Catholic University of America and it's got an amazing archive of materials from the US Catholic Church. So between 1930 and the early 1970s, and then sporadically, up until the early 2000s, the Catholic Church had screenings that lay Catholics and priests would attend and write reviews of the films that were coming out of Hollywood, and provide a rating of these particular films, and in part, rating them as to whether they were appropriate for a Catholic viewership. But a lot of the studios were aware of these particular ratings. And once you've got sort of past censorship, and into a rating system, the one to four rating of the church could impact upon viewership, and on, in cinemas. And so there was still an attempt to negotiate with the US Catholic Church and some Protestant Lutheran churches in order to get a good rating for a film and to get that religious audience.

09:22

So on the right hand side of my screen, you can see a cartoon from a Christian magazine, which sort of gives you an indication of what they thought of the film industry in the earlier era. And the idea that the Catholic Church has a responsibility to save their youth and their communion from the evil images and ideas being sent out by Hollywood. So it was about sort of protecting particular issues and ideas that related to Catholicism. So there were—and if you look at the work of David A. Kirby, he's done some excellent work on issues like evolution, and how the Catholic and Protestant churches engaged with those

particular issues on screen during the era of censorship. Here, I'm looking more afterwards. So I was going at the archive, looking at these materials. And I'd be looking at files where I got one piece of paper, or just a few little bits and pieces, a couple of clippings. And the archivist told me that I had to look at *The Exorcist*. And I was like, well, there's not going to be anything there for me in terms of science. But I've been here for three weeks, and I've looked at all of these files. So I really should just look at *The Exorcist* piece. And the first thing that I pulled out of this huge box of materials was a letter between the Vatican and the US Catholic Church, about *The Exorcist* and how it was going to present religious ritual versus scientific research. And so from this sort of like first piece of paper, I realized that there's really interesting going on with the exorcist in terms of how science and religion became part of the story of this film. And as the trailer says, somewhere between science and superstition lies *The Exorcist*.

11:20

So we've got this period of Hollywood, where we're sort of negotiating science on screen and thinking about how the Catholic Church responding to a film like *The Exorcist*. So I went in thinking it was all going to be really negative and reactionary. And there was I found a distinction between the way that it was being reported and the way that has historically been written about—as here Peter Biskind talks around how people responded to the film—but in reality, I found that the relationship between the filmmakers *The Exorcist*, the Vatican, the US Catholic Church was actually much more collaborative and complex.

11:55

So whereas on the one hand, newspapers are reporting, people fainting, and vomiting, and all sorts of massive reactions to the film, there were reports of breakdowns, suicides, possessions, spontaneous abortion—there was a particular set of reports on that—and also a clear narrative created by the media around religious communities outrage and alarm. And there were definitely religious groups, especially those who were connected to more evangelical leaders like Billy Graham, who were very much against this particular film—Billy Graham said that the devil was quite literally in the film itself. So the devil was embedded into the texture and reality of the films as they were being

distributed. And so the sort of like popular response was that there was this very visceral response to the representation of religion, and to how the film presented possession. And this has ended up being an interesting area of research for me in terms of thinking about how science became part of this particular narrative. So alongside this very explicit set of reports and narratives around sort of the evil of *The Exorcist*, and how *The Exorcist* was driving people to the churches and raising the number of exorcisms that were being requested, once you start to look into the documentation on the materials from the Catholic Church, the story is a bit more complex. In terms of how Friedkin as the director engaged with religious groups, but also how those groups were engaged with thinking through how this film might not necessarily be a negative thing.

14:05

So what I found with my research, so after having found all of this material at the Catholic archives, I arranged a second visit to go back to the Catholic American ... Catholic University of America in DC, and then also to go and look at the Friedkin archives that got released at the Oscars archives. And so I got to go over and be the first Brits, if not one of the first academics, to go and look at that newly curated collection. And the first thing that I pulled out the Billy Friedkin papers were very detailed drawings of the human body. And I found research papers and research that had been done on the representation of science in this particular film, which I really had not anticipated. So it turned out that the filmmakers had as much of a commitment to representing and exploring Catholic ritual as they did to contemporary scientific procedures. So part of this is that they had technical advisors, and if you look at the credits for *The Exorcist*, you'll see that there is a mixture of religious advisors from the US communion of Catholic Bishops, as well as medical advisors. So this particular film did get given a rating of quality. But there's then recognized as being problematic in terms of its representation of Catholicism, but at the same time in the correspondence that was not made publicly available, the Catholic priests who were involved with censoring and engaging with Hollywood actually recognize the film as as the lead, here, Thomas Stein puts strong propaganda for Christ. And the film itself has gone from being one that has been associated with Catholic rage and fears to being one that has become part of the way that

Catholic ... Catholics engage with film. So I have sort of lots of evidence of Catholic churches, then using *The Exorcist* as a way of opening up discussions about representation of Catholicism.

16:15

So we talk about anxieties around the medical content, whereas around the religious content, whereas in fact, it was the medical content where the most reports were from. So looking at the studio materials, a lot of the anxieties and actual reports of people leaving the cinema and fainting that were reported back to the studios were concerning the medical scenes that were part of this particular film. So you have then a representation of science that is balanced against the religious contents. So the priests have got to harm a child, Regan, in order to save her from Pazuzu. But the doctors, equally, in order to ... to diagnose what's happening on with this child are equally putting her through moments of pain and distress. So one of the interesting things about *The Exorcist* is it's the very first time that MRI is seen on screen. It had been the ... some images of MRIs had featured in *Nature* magazine. But it wasn't until *The Exorcist* that you had a public image of MRI. And the technology at the time was still very speculative had not become the standard practice. And so Friedkin had purposely researched into new and emergent science practices, as opposed to purely sort of balancing against older ritual. The lumbar treatments, the injections, which we're not going to show because they're quite squeamishly, horrible. I'm sure if you've seen the film, then you will remember them. But it was a very graphic representation of this particular procedure, which has later been used by medical professionals in training, but also in terms of public understanding of science, of why people fear these particular images.

18:14

So what I was interested in here was thinking about how science and religion work together. So it's not only Regan, who's probed and and morally ..., but rather the trust in science and medicine as well. So where medicine fails to work out what's happening with Regan, where medicine fails to cure, ritual and science do come in. So although a lot of the discussions around the exorcist are framed around faith and ritual, my interest within here was how it rejected the

1970s tendency to deify and make science the great fixer. I'm interested in the way the reception of the film has changed with Catholics as well as the scientific community. And thinking about the fact that the Catholic Church rather than simply demonizing and vilifying *The Exorcist* we're really interested in engaging with the studios, and with the filmmaker ... in terms of making the film, an interesting engagement between the apparent fight between science and religion. So if you're interested in reading the full paper, which is lengthy, you can see it here [<https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951211004465>] and it is free and open access. And if you're interested in finding out anything about me, you can access my websites through this particular QR. I'm sorry, that was two minutes over.

19:38

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much. Thank you, Amy. 10 minutes is a challenge I know for all of us, but thank you very much for a really interesting page ... paper. So thank you. If you have any questions, do reserve them for the end. I'm going to now move straight along to our second presenter. Steve Cho is Associate Professor of critical Studies in the School of cinema at San Francisco State University. He is the author of numerous books, which I won't list all here for time, except his most directly relevant. He's the author of *Refocus: The Films of William Friedkin*. [<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-refocus-the-films-of-william-friedkin.html>] And he's going to be presenting to us today about positioning of film within its historical context of 1973. So I'm just going to hand straight over to Steve, thank you.

20:23

Steve Choe

Great. Thank you so much. Hope everyone can hear me. I just want to ... I'm excited to be here. And I wanted to thank Robert singer and Gary Rhodes, for their continued support of my work on Friedkin, who I became interested in when I was a child. *The Exorcist* but then also *Sorcerer*, actually. So I wanted to place the film in historical context, and I have a text here that will last 10 minutes and I'm going to share my screen.

So as we know audiences stood in line for hours to watch *The Exorcist* only to later faint fall ill or experienced convulsions during the screening. Some of these traumatized viewers perhaps inexplicably expressed the compulsion to enter ... reenter the theater to finish watching the film and see what happens to the innocent Regan. Yeah, while *The Exorcist* was terrorizing audiences, Americans also observed a series of events that compelled many to think cynically about the norms of morality and the role of America in the world. Early in 1973, the Paris Peace Accords, which were signed, and which ended US involvement in the Vietnam War, and confirmed for some tens of thousands of Americans lives were squandered during the two decade-long conflict. The oil embargo of 1973 was a calculated strategic move by members of OPEC to retaliate against nations that were supportive of Israel, including the US during the Yom Kippur War of October. The most significant news in the second half of 1973, however, was the ongoing Watergate scandal. On November 17, during a press conference given in response to the impeachment proceedings that were already underway, Nixon remarked that "people have got to know whether or not their parent their president is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook." While he repeatedly denied the veracity of the charges against him specifically around his alleged use of power and obstruction of justice, Nixon's acknowledgement of the nevertheless ... of them nevertheless inflamed the judgment of the public. *The Exorcist* premiered in US theaters on December 26 1973, offsetting the spirits of the holiday season with his dark and somber tone. It opened to only 30 theaters, but it quickly became a bonafide blockbuster within weeks, first by word of mouth and then through the media attention given to the incredible success of the film. In an interview in 1974, where he comments on the loss of control experienced by the young female protagonists in *The Exorcist* Freidkin remarks that quote, I think a large part of our entertainment today is a result of the national nervous breakdown since the three assassinations and the Vietnam War. I think we're coming out of another kind of seizure with the Nixon administration.

Earlier in the summer of 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee began holding hearings on the events that took place in the Watergate building that year, the previous year. These hearings were televised on PBS for two weeks playing to a moralizing jury made up of millions of Americans watching from their living rooms. On October 20, a day after we now refer to as the Saturday ... Saturday Night Massacre, The country was gripped by the shocking news that the President fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Cox had subpoenaed hundreds of hours of phone conversations Nixon personally recorded from the Oval Office between himself and administration officials, family and friends. These tapes revealed a particularly unprecedented unpresidential side of Nixon, showing him speaking like a gang leader replete with profanity and tough guy talk. They would all but confirmed the testimony provided by the White House council, then extensive cover up of illegal activities had taken place. Nixon would go on to discredit his investigators by undermining faith in the investigative process, testing the limits of executive authority and inducing fundamental questions about what can be believed in the news media during those exceptional times.

24:45

When I interviewed Friedkin in 2017, he read he reiterated the importance of the “mystery of faith” that is central to this and its other films. This mystery is articulated over the course of *The Exorcist* through a series of epistemological failures to conclusively identify the source of Regan's increasingly horrifying condition. In doing so, it delineates a line of critical thinking that isolates held belief, particularly belief in that which is scientifically impossible might be possible at all. Medical discourses are showcased throughout the film that subject Regan to increasingly invasive medical techniques, from relatively routine somatic investigations to hypnosis, psychiatric evaluation, and the violent procedure of cerebral angiography—and this is just following up on the great presentation that we just heard. Doctors, radiologists, psychiatrists identify her condition as connected to a disorder of the nerves, hyperactivity weak performance in math, the result of cerebral vascular displacement, a somnambular form of possession and so on. These discourses set out to make visible the invisible condition that Regan embodies.

26:10

Here a critical logic is delineated through the film's narrative trajectory. First, the depiction of a series of attempts to explain her condition scientifically followed by the understanding that it can be only explained by recourse to the supernatural, a logic of exception that is crucial for building credence to the meaning of what the spectator sees and hears. Significantly, perhaps, this supernatural understanding is suggested by the detective Kinderman, who investigates the murder of Burke Dennings, and is a lover of cinema. At the ending of *The Exorcist*, we are left with the prospect that Ricans condition can be accounted for only by taking seriously the reality of spirits in the world. In an increasingly secular historical moment, several years following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Friedkin's film a test to the return of 16th century occult practice into everyday social life of an ancient nonhuman, unformed force that has been repressed and returns to the modern world. And by allowing for the possibility of that which is exceptional to scientific legitimization. In the authentic representation of the highly improbable, *The Exorcist* reevaluates the meaning of exorcism in the cinema and raises the question of whether its sounds and images can be believed as true. Manipulations of voice, soundtrack image and mechanical effects attest to the power to compel viewers to emotionally invest in the spectacle.

27:39

The problem of Catholic faith, whose logic so interests Friedkin, parallels the problem of the spectator's own faith in what is depicted on screen. Another line of thinking I'd like to delineate here revolves around the representation of virtue within popular cinema. In her essay "Melodrama Revised" [in *Refiguring Film Genres*, edited by Nick Browne], Linda Williams pays particular attention to the spectacle of pathos in melodrama's framing of the injured body as an image that compels sympathetic judgment. "The key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode, for if virtue is not obvious suffering, often depicted as the literal suffering of an agonized body is." The agonized body at once solicits the recognition of suffering by beset victim and assigns the body that bears the signs of agony with virtue, interiority, humanity.

These signs of suffering compel a longing for return to a state of incorruptibility, to a time before the violence occurred.

28:45

In many ways the most commercially successful of Friedkin's films also seems to make the most explicit the basic features of the melodramatic mode: the victimization of Regan and the debasement of her innocence, Regan scarred and injured body as evidence of demonic possession, the profound regrets of Karras, the heroic exorcist who arrives to recover the girl's virtue. Her bedroom functions as a kind of metaphoric space for dichotomies between inside and outside the body, good and evil, here and there are played out. Meanwhile, practices such as the throwing of Holy Water, the reciting of the sacraments of floating bed cracking walls, the sign of the cross, point back to the legitimizing of the sacred in an ostensibly post-sacred age, where moral sentiment provides the meaning for accessing virtue. By the final exorcism sequence, modern melodrama is radicalized in *The Exorcist* and becomes, in effect re-sacralized. And ironically, it turns out to be constitutive for the appearance of earthly ... for unearthly evil in the world.

29:57

On the other hand, while the film's fantastic visual and auditory elements seem to lift it above the secular melodrama of American politics, they nevertheless reiterate its most violent tendencies through its reframing within Political Theology poli- ... political theology and justification of unchecked sovereign power. This problem, of course, is made particularly acute in that the innocent body of Regan also possesses its moral opposite. Virtue and villainy, innocence and utter defilement are forced to coexist. By embodying contradictory forces that both victimizes and is victimized—determinations that themselves are made possible by the popular melodramatic mode, the possessed Regan places this mode fundamental to American popular cinema into a horrifying moral crisis. In order that she may be saved, Karras violently assaults her revolting and sympathetic body.

31:00

In turn, the power of this film inheres in its capacity to induce the possibility of disbelief for the modern film spectator, showing that the mystery that the director mentioned is key to understanding his film is relevant not only for appreciating characters crisis of faith within the narrative, but also perhaps the issue of faith more generally. Through this, *The Exorcist* delineates a path toward ... the toward the critical consideration of anxieties that constitute the precondition for faith in a cinema image and others in the world, and the relationship to the justification of violence. At a moment when America was perceived twice to have lost its moral righteousness in the world, when it was not clear whether the President could be deemed a crook, when the press had lost the faith of American citizens, *The Exorcist* will continue to remain relevant and timely. It will continue to hold out for the comfort afforded by traditional morality, even to hopes that are most unearthly, and exceptional to our modern times.

Thank you.

31:59

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much, Steve. That was great. I really enjoyed that. Thank you for a great paper and I look forward to talking about it more in the questions. I'm going to move on to our third speaker. So I'm pleased to introduce Linda Shepherd. Linda is an independent scholar and author of *Faith Horror: Cinematic Visions of Satanism, Paganism and Witchcraft* [<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/faith-horror/>]. Her rich- ... her research focuses on the connection between the supernatural spiritualism and horror cinema. And as she is the founder and chief researcher for the internationally successful podcast, Hallowed Histories [<https://hallowed-histories.org/>], and she's gonna be speaking to us today with the paper "What an Excellent Day for *The Exorcist*: A Classical Horror for a Contemporary World." So thank you, Linda.

32:50

LMK [Linda] Sheppard

Thank you, Stacy. So I'm gonna go ahead and share my screen and get started with my PowerPoints. I'm just gonna go back well, to too far. Okay, so, here we go. Um, so my paper again is "What a Fine Day for *The Exorcist*: A Classical Horror for a Contemporary World."

33:15

Okay, so, um, in the penultimate scene for *The Exorcist* father, Damien Karras, who up until this moment has been conducting a failed exorcism on a pre-pubescent teenager now begins to fear the death of the child to save her body and so he thus demands that the indwelt demon leave the girl and enter him instead. Once possessed, according to the dominant reading of the film, two things occur: Regan appears to be freed of evil and effect returned to a state of innocence. And second, Karras appears to be compelled to attack the girl as he had to theoretically is turned from an evangelizer to an evil-doer. As he fluctuates from priest to possessed, he resist the temptation to commit one mortal sin while committing another. Ostensibly under the influence of evil he is compelled to throw himself out the window and down the stairs a suicidal act that has already proven deadly. Well, this popular reading suggests that the film ends with evil vanquishing good, a common trip to the faith horror cycle of the 1960s and 1970s films including *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*. William Peter Blatty who penned both the novel and the adaptive screenplay, however, had an altogether different thematic intention for both this scene in particular and for the film overall. According to an interview with Mark Kermode, the writer wanted to make a work that offered a positive statement about God and His relationship to humanity. He was as deeply concerned that the film's ultimate message regarding good overcoming evil might be misconstrued in the above way. He suggested in the same interview, "Billy [William Friedkin, the film's director] rehearsed every move of that ending, because we were aware that it could be misinterpreted, and we rehearsed everything that was happening so it could not possibly be." For Blatty, Karras invites the demon to possess him to save the child's soul. Once released, the priest then jumps out the window to destroy the demon that is now living within him in a similar act of benevolent control. In this way, rather than ending, suggesting the triumph of darkness. The conclusion evokes Christ-like symbolism, as Karras sacrifices himself to

repair the rupture of sin. Friedkin likewise maintains that the film should be read as proselytizing not only for the church, but also for the innate goodness and efficacy of faith. While the intentionality of the artist admittedly is not equal to that meaning of the work, this presentation will consider in relationship to both the criticism published within the popular press and the debates forwarded within current academic discourse. Indeed, it will be suggested through both a textual and an extratextual reading of the film, that first and foremost, *The Exorcist* reiterates the power of good over evil, something that might be said for the genre as a whole, up until the release of *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968.

36:28

This foundation is also furthered and foregrounded in the primary image for the promotion of the film. While some argue that the film poster offers a reversal, with the representative of good—the priest, in darkness—and the locus of evil—the apartment in which the demon dwells—as being bathed in light, this image might also be read, however, more straightforwardly: a man under the shadow of sin must overcome the lure of the light of Satan, Lucifer as the shining one, the light bearer. In fact, it is only when one considers the conclusion and the promotion of *The Exorcist* that equally exert the effective power of Christianity and its icons to overcome evil, the dichotomous theme that resonates throughout this text, that *The Exorcist* might better be interpreted not as a new Hollywood faith horror that reverses the tenets of good versus evil, with the latter proving efficacious over the former, but instead a classical horror, that presents Christianity both as good and efficacious and evil as that which must be defeated. Indeed, while academic debate regards this text as either presenting faith as a sociocultural signifier, it equally is relevant to read the film as dealing with the issues of faith as just *that*: issues of faith.

37:49

In *Film Quarterly*'s contemporaneous review of *The Exorcist* Michael Dempsey pans the film as being both reactionary and revolting, an exploitation film. Dempsey writes, “the movie ruthlessly manipulates the most primitive fears of the audience. Those who want to return to that old time religion can have their

beleaguered beliefs shored up by this circus of horrors.” This tendency to read the film from the shamelessly manipulating public angst was likewise noted by British film critic Mark Kermode, who comments: “for the first time in a mainstream movie audiences witnessed the graphic desecration of everything that is considered wholesome and good: the home, the family, the church and most shockingly, the child.” The above critiques seem to fall in line with theories forwarded by academics who, on the one hand, read the film as engaging with the loss of grand narratives in the Léotardian sense. Andrew Tudor in *Monsters and Mad Scientists* argues that in *The Exorcist*, possession is a signifier for what amounts to a cultural paranoia, but out of the failure of contemporaneous sociopolitical institutions to offer stability—something that was just mentioned in the previous paper. Mark Jancovich, “Post-Fordism, Postmodernism and Paranoia: The Dominance of the Horror Genre in Contemporary Culture”—and Mark is actually probably here today—ties this paranoia to late-20th-century post-Fordist ideology, which fueled a distrust of authority in general. For Jancovich, like Tudor, the possession theme thus presents a potentially useful way of representing the resultant instability of consciousness and identity. While paranoia and institutional failure rests on one side of the academic debate, feminist discourse, fear of intrusion and bodily objection make up the other. Barbara Creed asserts in *The Monstrous Feminine* that *The Exorcist* ... in *The Exorcist* “possession becomes an excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant female behavior, which is depicted as depraved, monstrous and perversely appealing.” In the middle ground, in terms of academic discourse, rests with ... theorists including Robin Wood and Vivian Sobchak, both of whom adopt a psychoanalytical framework, which they interpolate into the contemporaneous cultural climate, thus developing what has come to be known as the “evil child” cycle. Robin Wood in “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” suggests that the Antichrist and the child monster are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty or innocent, while Sobchack argues, coincident with the bourgeois society's negative response to the youth movements and drug culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, generic emphasis was on the child not as a terrorized victim, but instead as being in possession of and victimizing their households.

40:46

While each of the aforementioned academic debates likewise touch upon the importance of evil possession, not one suggests this conflict is primarily spiritual. In other words, while these arguments establish possession as a social signifier, what they fail to do is discuss the struggle in terms of religion and spiritual affiliation. The thematic concern in religion is one that I have explored in *Faith Horror: Visions of Satanism, Paganism and Witchcraft*. Herein I locate a thread common to many late 1960s and 1970s supernatural horror texts, in which an ironic maneuver, equally establish and then reverse the classical horror conflict of the sacred and the profane—a cultural trend that I've linked to significant paradigmatic shifts and across the religious spectrum, including popular culture's adoption of alternative faith. So you have Mick Jagger and “Sympathy for the Devil,” The Beatles' embrace of Hinduism, for example. And then increasing acceptance of atheism—and think here of *Time* magazine's issue “Is God Dead?—the rise of the religious right under televangelism and the Ministry of Billy Graham, and Catholic reforms promised by the Second Vatican Council.

42:10

What characterizes faith horror narratives is both their conflict and their resolution. In traditional horrors, those produced up until *Rosemary's Baby*—and which I consider *The Exorcist* to be one—the battle is between good and evil. And the result of this confrontation is that through faith in God, and the tools that symbolize Christianity—the cross, holy water, prayer—become efficacious and thus good wins the day. In faith horror, however, the battle is between faith and the lack thereof. Significantly, it is the protagonists that lack belief, while those figured as antagonists hold firm to a higher power. So, ni- ... Chris MacNeil's struggles within *The Exorcist*. The higher power and what might be regarded as traditional reversal is not the Holy Trinity, but instead the devil and the powers of darkness. So the believers believe in “evil,” quote-unquote. However, this is not true, obviously, in *The Exorcist*. Following indicators located in contemporaneous reception, and considering the creative input of the [aside: thank you] of the filmmakers, they suggest that religion was a key element. But both the popular secular and Christian press a like share this view of conflict of

The Exorcist between good and evil, where good is traditionally Christian and evil demonic forces. However, this reading is not one often forwarded within academic debate. Indeed, if the modern horror film articulates the invasion of the everyday by malevolent supernatural forces, which channeled into the secular world can and will destroy everybody with whom they come in contact, and while we and under the guise of docile domesticity are offered up as unwilling prey of graphically presented horrors, then *The Exorcist* is a film in which good triumphs over evil under the hands of the Catholic Church, its representatives and its icons. It stands alone as a classical horror made for our contemporary world. And it being so popular and critically successful—remember that *The Exorcist*, received nine nomination Academy Award nominations—*The Exorcist* marks a crucial transition in the modern horror movie and when the—obviously as made manifest by this conference—has endured, and ... remained significant after even after 50 years. So thank you very much for listening. And I will now stop sharing my screen. Okay.

44:37

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much, Linda, and thank you to all three of our panelists. We have a few minutes for questions. So if I can ask each of our panelists to put their cameras back on and if anyone has any questions, you can put it in the chat or message me. But I'm going to start with chair's prerogative, and I really enjoyed your papers and I think they all will really dovetail really nicely. And I suppose one of the questions I had, as I was listening to the three of you, which Steve started touched on a bit was, I was in this relationship between the kind of the supernatural on the spiritual on the scientific and the kind of secular lack of faith. I was thinking a lot of father Karras's crisis of faith, and we're and the kind of Psychology of him as a psychologist and a priest. And I wondered if any of you had thoughts about the way in which his characters integrate like is his care narrative trajectory in this and what his role is in this kind of battle between science and the supernatural. And Amy has put her hand up and wants to jump in first. Yeah, thank you.

45:46

He, for me, he's a fascinating character, because he brings together the sides and when you look at the sort of documentation is often described as a psychologist-priest or a scientist-priest. So you've started off getting these connections between the two, the death of his mother as the sort of point where religion can't save him, and neither neither neither, neither can science and then his sort of issues. So as a character, who's very much of that period of the 1970s, in that post-classical non-censorship cinema, where you could have these complex characters where a priest could question their faith, but also do that through not only religion, society, but through science, and I'll let someone else come in.

46:29

Stacey Abbott

Yes, thank you. Would anyone else like to jump in with thoughts on Father Karras?

46:34

Steve Choe

Well, I think that he becomes even more sympathetic by, you know, knocking down his sacred status in a certain way, as a priest; you know, he looks like a movie star. He, he jogs, you know, he's got kind of issues that we all kind of go through as everyday, you know, Americans or something. So, in the book, as we know, I mean, he was originally cast by Blatty as a as a psychologist-priest. So I think, you know, that's part of the characterization in the film, as well.

47:13

Stacey Abbott

Thank you.

47:16

LMK Sheppard

I often thought about this film relationship. So I was looking at, obviously, *The Exorcist* as being kind of like, classic film, in many ways, a classic horror film, if you can argue that. And so I look at it a lot of ways in terms of like the Gothic and Gothic structures. And so you have this idea of the science versus the

supernatural that plays such a big part. And what's kind of interesting about *The Exorcist*, when looking at it from that framework, is the fact that in the original Gothic, they were really sort of condemning Catholicism, you know what I mean? It was basically a condemnation of that. So you have the evil nuns and the evil priests and *The Monk* and stuff. And it's interesting, that Karras, although he definitely has issues, and I think the film it generally has issues where science can only go so far. And if you completely believe in science, and you know, you're kind of, then you're doomed in some ways. You're almost like, you know, the Frankenstein, Frankenstein in that way. But also, I think that the point is that Karras, you know, he has he has to rely upon his belief. And so it kind of presents faith as being something that is a positive mechanism. It's interesting. It's configured in terms of Catholicism.

48:33

Stacey Abbott

Excellent. Thank you all for really great question a great answers. I've got a question from Kris Woofter to all of you, and I'll just read it out. He says Steve Choe's book discusses Friedkin's interest in Catholicism, and in particular, a unique visit to see the Shroud of Turin and the overwhelmingly moving spectacle of the experience as akin to the cinematic form. Would any of you like to comment on the exorcist as an ode to the power of the cinematic?

49:08

Any thoughts?

49:13

LMK Shepard

Do you want to go ahead. So Friedkin talks about this idea, and I think it's something that he mentions it in the in the, in the documentary, of the idea that he wanted to make the battle of good versus evil cinematics. So he has these scenes of darkness kind of conjoined with, with, with with scenes of of light to kind of make the visual the kind of battle between good and evil. I also kind of talked about the original promotional poster taken from the Greek the Greek

painting, which also plays with this idea of shadow and light and the kind of interesting, interesting way.

49:57

Thank you Steve, Amy, did you want to jump in?

50:03

Steve Choe

Sure I yeah, I started the introduction to the book with this account of Friedkin when he was in the 2000s, when he was employed as an opera director. He was, he sought out a visit to the Shroud of Turin, I guess at that time, you had to make appointments. And he was completely moved and broke down in tears. He and his wife are kind of given this private showing. And so you know, the Shroud of Turin as a kind of material that attests to the reality of Christ Christ's body. I likened it to the experience of for Friedkin of cinema and the way in which he said, he told me that, you know, this is a story about man's inhumanity against man. You know, and it's told through this, this medium that records the past. And so, you know, this issue of authenticity, I think is so crucial. As Amy chambers really pointed out, you know, the extent to which that he made sure that audiences could believe in what they were seeing by using the most sophisticated and up-to-date medical techniques, but also, you know, in his other films, like, in *The French Connection*, he made sure that the cocaine was real, you know, or the heroin was real. So, yeah, I'll just, I'll just stop there.

51:43

Okay. Thank you. Kris, we're now at the end of the session, I've got a couple of questions that have come through, but I don't know if we want to reserve those for later or just or you have our because we have our kind of five minute break now. What are your thoughts?

52:02

Kris Woofter

Maybe we could do one more?

52:05

Stacey Abbott

We can do one more question and then just roll right into the next and roll right into the next. Okay. The question is from Andy Thomas. And he says that Amy had mentioned the portrayal and failure of modern medicine to do anything other than harm Regan, and I'm having a hard time thinking of other films that are so bold. I wonder if she has any other examples or counter examples that the efficacy of science against religion so directly?

52:34


Amy C. Chambers

I love a nice, easy question. I don't think there's one that does it quite so explicitly. And I think that's what really got me was that sort of, like explicitness and I'd always have been grown up in Anglo Catholic, which is a very British thing, Anglo Catholic household. And it was, I'd always sort of been put off it because it was gonna be terrifying. And it was when I later sort of started researching the film and got an archivist going, now you have to look at the box, look at *The Exorcist* box, it's the best box in the archive. And then suddenly realizing that actually, this for me was not a movie about religion. It was a movie about science. And but I can't think of personally off the top of my head that does it quite so explicitly. But through the whole process. It's the research for me that was so exciting that he worked with psychologists, he were friekin I'm talking about, he had worked with psychologists worked with doctors. He had consultants from the best hospitals on the East Coast, and some in LA consulting on the film. I mean, it was a level that I have not seen before. And there are very few films that have this level of balance in terms of their, their sort of filmmakers engaging with the scientific research. So I've done some work looking at the idea of filmmakers, of archivists, of knowledge about science. Kubrick had a very similar approach, I guess, you could maybe see something like *A Clockwork Orange*. But again, it's not as explicit in the same way as science and religion take on very different roles in Kubrick's world. Whereas the freaking and *The Exorcist*, it was so explicit, but embedded right through the process, from the very early research to the book through to the research in the film. That was a longer answer than last time. Sorry.

54:22

Stacey Abbott

That was great. Thank you. Thank you. Okay, well, I want to say thank you very much. So to our speakers for an excellent panel. And with this brings this first panel to an end. So thank you, so I will hand over to Kris to initiate the next panel. So, thank you very much.

Horror  **Reverie**

<https://www.monstrum-society.ca/horror-reverie-symposia.html>

- 2023 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).