

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

### Introduction: Exorcising *The Exorcist*

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# Horror Reverie

## Horror Reverie 2:

### An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of *The Exorcist*

#### INTRODUCTION

#### Exorcising *The Exorcist*

Marcus Prasad

*The Exorcist*, to me, has always been a reference point for the more contemporary horror films I work on—its iconography has transcended its 1973 inception and has practically inaugurated an entire subgenre of films that engage with its vault of visual cues. The whites of Pazuzu’s eyes, a horizontal body rising slowly above a bed, bodily contortions, guttural growls, and the silhouette of a figure in a trench coat have become symbols that not only work to place the film in proximity to a well-established canon of horror, but also have become the markers of an expansive and ever-growing dialogue, from *The Evil Dead* (1981) to *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), and most recently, *Evil Dead Rise* (2023), to name a few.

On March 11, 2023, the second Horror Reverie symposium,<sup>1</sup> organized by Stacey Abbott, Mark Jancovich, Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Gary D. Rhodes, and Kristopher Woofter, devoted three panels to discussion and analysis of *The Exorcist* and its legacy. I felt at home amongst the participants and the presentations they shared, each expressing a passion for the film and horror generally that I too have fostered from a young age. Over the past few months,

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<sup>1</sup> Recordings of the full online symposium are viewable in this issue of *Monstrum*. Complete transcripts follow in the Appendix to the issue.

having reflected on the symposium and rewatched the film for the first time since I was eight years old, I was able to travel backward in time and reconnect with some of my early confrontations with the genre, and what it was that continuously drew me back to horror. Collapsing the space between my childhood and my present self as such was like my own personal archaeological dig—not necessarily one that unleashed a malevolent entity like Pazuzu, but instead revealed a kind of map leading to some of the motivations behind my gravitation to horror and its formative relationship to my sense of self.

In 2004, my parents and I moved from a house in the suburbs of Richmond, British Columbia to an apartment in the city's centre. I distinctly remember this upheaval as marked by a new routine of taking an elevator multiple times a day, with the accompanying fear that it would break down while I was in it. It seemed like from the day we moved in I started having dreams that the elevator's buttons were mixed up, or that it would stop suddenly, and I'd have to pry the doors open between floors. When I reflect on this time, I partly attribute the anxiety to mourning the loss of my early childhood home and being launched into a newer, shinier urban space. But this period was also characterized by a new cable subscription my dad had purchased, which included an AMC channel that broadcasted a 24/7 schedule of classic horror films.

I would spend most of my Sundays watching the unending marathon which seemed to always include Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) in the morning, and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) or Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) in the afternoons. In the early evenings, as if aligned with my bedtime, *The Exorcist* was scheduled, and I would watch with excited anticipation that would quickly turn to paranoia as my own bedroom transformed into the potential site for demonic possession. Where were my parents in this equation? They were right there with me, just as fascinated by these films' domestic disturbances as I was. The only thing I wish they could have protected me from was my childhood proclivity to blur the lines between fact and fiction, or at least offer a reassurance that discerning the two would become easier as I got older.

*The Exorcist* moved me the first time I watched it. As a fourth grader, I couldn't yet deeply connect with the dreadful atmosphere building of Kubrick, or resonate with Carpenter's targeted teens (I don't think anyone had it out for me just yet). What I could draw from was instead a wealth of symbols and familiar iconography from a Catholic upbringing, and a gay identity that was bubbling underneath the surface. It was like Friedkin honed into the contradictions I was unknowingly grappling with, which at the time registered

as pure fear. With contemplation, a bit of hindsight, and more life experience, however, I now see how this film marked a moment of identification for a confused gay boy who perhaps felt more connected to a chaotic demon than a well-behaved, repentant Catholic. Of course, now that I'm an adult, it's quite easy to slap on justifications for the unshakeable distress this film instilled in me and to connect it to sources of power and influence, which I think is one of the main things we do as horror scholars. But what I want to think through instead, via my own experience and alongside the *Horror Reverie* presentations, is how this film's excesses and intriguing monstrosity marked a key moment in the development of my queer identity.

What I was most reactive to, as a child and still today, is the grotesqueness of Friedkin's representation of demonic possession; in all of its bloodiness, oozing, and secretions mixed with a specific form of violence through which the film (not unlike much religious iconography) seems to revel in its own infliction and reception of pain. When Pazuzu comes to inhabit the body of Regan, we are met with a synthesis of two complete opposites that fold into each other—the pure, benevolent, and innocent child infected by the perverse, profane, and destructive demon. The two exacerbate each other and make the desecrations of Regan's body and selfhood all the more intriguing and unbearable. Through this operation, *The Exorcist* turns the act of looking into an evocation of a kind of crisis of faith and moral sensibility. If we see what happens to Regan as a tragic, religious anomaly that should be expelled, we're on the right side of God. If we however find ourselves pulled by some kind of drive toward the visual extremities of possession, we become blasphemers.

This ambivalent moral stance is a significant part of the fascinating critical territory taken up by the contributors to the *Horror Reverie 2* symposium. Amy C. Chambers opens the symposium noting that *The Exorcist* evoked extremely visceral responses from viewers, with many collapsing, fainting, or becoming ill upon viewing the film's body horror and, significantly, the moments in which Regan was put under distress and pain from doctors. This failure of science to resolve the issue at hand not only exposes the gritty underbelly of medical practice, but simultaneously rejects a deification of science at large, positioning it as that which can neither encompass nor comprehend the full range of human and earthly experience. This notion, as Steven Choe suggests in his presentation, legitimizes the sacred in the film—presenting demonic possession as that which terrorizes its victim to an extent beyond what humans are capable of fixing. In this way, Pazuzu's incarnation within Regan begins to crystallize the threat of both an epistemological and ontological impossibility: a manifestation of Hell that had only been conceived

of as possible after life, beyond flesh, past the threshold of the earthly. As it becomes literalized through the child's body, it threatens order, rationality, and ultimately, the hegemonic construction of not just science, but religion.

Linda (LMK) Sheppard states in her presentation that the exorcism becomes an excuse to display aberrant female behaviour, which becomes perversely appealing. And this, to me, connects to a quote from filmmaker Alexandre O. Philippe's conversation with actress Eileen Dietz in the second panel, noting that fear is a gateway to self-knowledge, forcing us into thinking about our choices. Witnessing the deviant disposition and behaviour of Regan's possessed body is intriguing for its transgression of normative social conduct, which becomes a vehicle through which a cathartic expression of our own unfavourable urges can play out. Another way to look at this, is that it contorts the boundary between fear and pleasure and makes them almost indiscernible, forcing them to become an affect bound by contradiction. The possessed body of Regan crystallizes this contradiction both narratively and visually. She becomes an integrally irrational figure, not only for her uncanny wavering between vulgar demon and struggling, pleading twelve-year-old girl, but as an irreconcilable subjectivity that oscillates between an object of perverse pleasure from watching the progressive desecration of her body and soul, and a fear or aversion to such destruction suggesting that if we look away, we are not part of her profanation by unholy means.

But to look is to participate, and if you make it through an entire viewing of *The Exorcist* without throwing up, crying, or shutting it off entirely, you're not necessarily a bad Catholic, but are more likely to be exactly the kind of person of faith that the Catholic authorities who supported and advised on the film felt *The Exorcist* might speak to. I do think, though, there is something unique to the representation of evil in this film against the pre-approved backdrop of Catholicism. As Simon Brown notes in his presentation in panel three on *The Exorcist's* sequels, the particular framing of evil raises a central question, which I think can be transposed back onto the original: does *The Exorcist* confront evil or simply show it in a literal form? I think it does both in an attempt to level the field of contestation, to suggest that the neutralization of evil via science, religion, or the power of family love are equally valiant pursuits, none of which will necessarily prevail against the unknown. Aside from the conflicted form of looking that this film encourages, one of its more harrowing aspects is the bittersweet ending in which Regan is freed at the cost of Father Karras's life—a life that is already plagued by guilt over his mother's lonely death leading him to a crisis of faith. Yes, the young girl is redeemed and Pazuzu is seemingly exorcised, but this is only made possible through what could be read as the

suicide of a key representative of the Church. In this way, the film's narrative conceit around the battle between good and evil is left somewhat unsatisfied, without the feeling that the greater good has saved the day.

As an eight-year-old, this was a revelation for me. The notion that Catholicism was fallible and susceptible to ulterior forces went against what I was taught, and shook my sense of abstract, ecclesiastical security and absolutism. Not necessarily in a hopeless way, but toward a direction that made me question what deviance might actually entail. If I'm drawn to grotesque and potentially perverse things, I should at least be able to explore why. It also allowed me to begin to be more critical of the institutionalization of religion and what it deems normal. I already knew I was a little bit different from the other boys in my grade, and my strange attraction to the grotesqueness of *The Exorcist* perhaps punctuated that fact. It encouraged me to experience my own form of alterity cathartically when I didn't have the tools or resources to express it otherwise, and drove me toward other films that have similarly perverse, abject, or destructive characters set against Catholic imagery and narrative—my two favourites from around this era of my life are Francis Lawrence's *Constantine* (2005) and Rupert Wainwright's *Stigmata* (1999).

It is fascinating for me to consider my early engagement with horror as one that articulated my relationship to myself, and later my scholarly interests as I grew up. Horror films have always given me a way to add complexity to my feelings of fear, to combine them with pleasure and desire, and to connect them to critical academic inquiry. I continue to do this today in my own work, which thinks through queerness as a representational strategy across contemporary horror films. Unsurprisingly, I'm mostly drawn toward those films that arguably have unhappy endings—James Wan's *Insidious* (2010), David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), to name a few. These films bring me back to my eight-year-old self, watching *The Exorcist* for the first time, and the incomparable feeling of my stomach folding into itself as Regan urinates on the carpet and menacingly declares “you're gonna die up there.” These are structuring moments for me that are a combination of hatred and love, disgust and pleasure, endearment and disavowal, that unsurprisingly are also constitutive binaries of my always-changing sense of self, where there's no happy ending or ending at all per se, just constant movement. It's clear from the presentations at this second *Horror Reverie* that Friedkin's film has had an impact on the participants and attendees; their captivating research speaks to an afterlife of the film that persists 50 years after its release. It was an honour to share a space with scholars who are so evidently passionate about horror, and to reflect

on how *The Exorcist* has specifically left its mark on me, its audience, and its paratexts.

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