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A DEVIL-OBSESSED CONGLOMERATION OF CHRISTIAN MISFITS

AMERICANS LOVE THEIR SATANIC POSSESSION FLICKS;
SO WHY, IN 2009, ISN'T *THE EXORCIST* SCARY ANYMORE?

DISCUSSED: *Fox Mulder, Expert Portraits of Lunacy,*
Coleridge's Willing Suspension of Disbelief, Italian Men with Mommy Problems,
Shameless Endorsements of Medieval Reasoning, Stevie Nicks,
Clammy Lime-Colored Glop, World-Renowned Demon Wrestlers,
Ecclesiastical Gang-Rape, Horrifying Psychosexual Readings,
Elegant Occultist Claptrap, Unspeakable Paradoxes, Stolen Doughnuts

A POT INSTEAD OF A HAMMER

My mother was five months pregnant with me when William Friedkin's film *The Exorcist* opened in 1973. By most accounts the scariest film ever made, *The Exorcist* terrorized my mother so thoroughly that she thought she would go into labor and spontaneously expel me onto the theater floor. Two lukewarm Catholics of modest education, recently married and poised to begin a family, my parents were the perfect targets of a

film about demonic possession. They had heard enough Sunday sermons to take seriously the presence of Satan in the world, and yet knew less about the mythological underpinnings of all religion, the innate perceptual tendencies that cause humans to behold in their own backyards a clash between forces of light and darkness. Joseph Campbell once quipped that the difference between a believer and a nonbeliever is that the latter has not confused a metaphor with a fact. And so my parents were a confused pair.

Thanks to savvy news channels, those years from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s saw an American upsurge in

Satan stories. We're a soberer people now. Anyone in the year 2009 who believes that Satan takes up residence in the bodies of young girls (or plays guitar in a metal band) needs either a science teacher or a psychiatrist. But my mother nearly gave birth to me in a movie theater in 1973 because the convincing horror of *The Exorcist*, in concert with a low hum of national paranoia, made her believe. She went to the theater wanting fear and fear is what she got. There's just one problem: *The Exorcist* isn't scary. Campy, maybe. Scary: not even a little.

I watched the movie for the first time only recently; strange that I had never been even mildly curious about the movie that almost filched me from the womb prematurely. And yes, perhaps I harbored my own trifling dread that the film did indeed wield the power to spook a life. I was, after all, a child of Roman Catholicism, weaned on drama, ritual, hocus-pocus, and flesh-fetishism that for eons have made Catholicism an attractive option for those who crave pageantry. My hard-won reason almost always has a difficult time fending off an easeful inclination toward the sensational and improbable: Sasquatch, UFOs, the Loch Ness Monster, the Kraken. Remember gullible Fox Mulder from *The X Files*? He had hanging behind his desk a poster of a UFO hovering above a landscape, the words I WANT TO BELIEVE in bold across the top. That's me: *wanting* to believe.

But if I felt any trepidation at all about the infamous force of

The Exorcist—about my own penchant for wanting to believe while I watched the most terrifying film in history—that trepidation evaporated about twenty-five uneventful minutes into it.

Much of that infamous force stems from someone's assertion that the film is based on true events, an assertion tantamount to claiming that *Star Wars*, too, is a true story. Katie, my wife—a Chinese American schooled in Asian superstitions many millennia older than those that pester Catholics—lay curled at my side convinced that *The Exorcist* would either make one of the devil's minions sojourn in our home, or else cause our unborn child—at that time no bigger than a popcorn kernel—to enter the world with horns and hooves. (Talk about fear: becoming a father is up there with having your soul sabotaged by the Prince of Darkness.)

Most horror films get the better of Katie, but she is especially susceptible to stories about Satan and the evil he likes to perpetuate in the U.S.A. Perhaps because I came of age in the mid-1980s when the media-fed satanic-cult-craze was at its zenith, I understood this evil to be, more terrifyingly, the work of average psychopaths. When I was ten years old, police discovered a child my age in the next town who had been murdered by a stepparent. The adult had pounded eight-inch nails into the child's skull with a cooking pot; he was now claiming that Satan had taken charge of his soul. The story shook me, trailed me for weeks afterward, and I've never for-

gotten those details: the eight-inch nails, the pot instead of a hammer.

A BRIEF PRIMER ON HELL

One's definitions of hell and evil influence one's reaction to *The Exorcist*. Inevitably, one's education plays a starring role here. Katie was educated at home under Chinese superstition and in American schools under Christian superstition. I attended Catholic grade school, yes, but once I reached adolescence I (for some reason) put myself on a diet of secular books and then began to understand all my religious texts as strictly allegorical.

Here's what my Catholic education did not teach me about hell and evil but what anyone with a spare month can learn from Jeffrey Burton Russell's magisterial four-volume study of the history of the concept of radical evil, as embodied by the devil: the book of Daniel makes the first reference to hell as a domain of reprimand, a concept embellished only slightly throughout the New Testament until you come to a sinister comic book called Revelation, where the idea turns grandiose. Of course Revelation has nothing at all to say about the future but rather concerns the time in which it was written, a time when Jews were mightily persecuted by monolithic Rome. The number 666, what John calls the mark of the beast—never mind that John didn't even write this final chapter—has not even a strand of

spittle to connect it to Satan. 666 is the numerical equivalent of a certain someone's name, a madman more horrifying than any prince burped free from the mouth of hell: Nero. Check a biography if you doubt it; Edward Champlin's *Nero* (2003) paints an expert portrait of lunacy. And Dante's *Inferno* is as political as Revelation; the book was penned by a pissed-off poet in exile from his beloved Florence. His hell teems with hated rivals, with those bastards who drove him from the epicenter of Italian culture.

So the first hint of Hades as a place of punishment might appear in Daniel, but the Hebrew abode of the dead, Sheol, is as different from the Christian hell as Boston is from Topeka. The book of Isaiah makes clear that Sheol is synonymous with separation from God, with an after-life that spares neither the wicked nor the righteous. Saint Augustine—Christ-emulator extraordinaire—would give a nod to the Hebrew progenitors of Christianity by defining evil the same way: total estrangement from God. It was the profoundly mixed-up Augustine who, in *City of God*, turned Christianity rabidly anti-flesh, damning generations of curious pre-weds to a perpetuity of hell's heat. Leave it to a former debaucher to wreck things for the rest of us.

Furthermore, early Protestantism was as anti-sex and evil-happy as its founder, Martin Luther, an admirable and iconoclastic gent who was otherwise the most devil-obsessed mister ever born. At some point a league of those Protestants

turned a bit wackier and then gave themselves a new name: Puritans. And guess where those Puritans pitched their tent? That's right: they landed in the U.S.A., toting devil-fear and sex-aversion. Their poetic boss, Jonathan Edwards, would have been locked away in a mental institution if only he had been born a few centuries later. Instead, flocks of entertainment-starved ignoramuses trekked multiple miles in atrocious weather in order to hear Edwards spew forth with great flair about hell and the quickest way to get there. Read just a few segments of his tract *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and you will see a masterful amalgam of sanctimony, sincerity, and bullshit.

Fast-forward to the Salem witch trials. What does any of this have to do with the terrifying power of *The Exorcist*, or with the fact that the film was only one of a trio of great devil flicks, sandwiched between *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968 and *The Omen* in 1976? Almost everything. Those weird American years from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s were only in small part responsible for the film's initial reception and increasing reputation, because the truth is that America has *always been* a devil-obsessed conglomeration of Christian misfits. Overt awareness of evil is woven into our very social fabric, our national consciousness. The Puritans saw to that; the ground they laid was more than a match for the rationality of Jefferson and Franklin and those founders who knew better than to be bamboozled by

Luther's offspring. I imagine Luther, Jefferson, and Franklin shoulder to shoulder on a sofa watching *The Exorcist*, and while Jefferson and Franklin snicker, Luther tells them, "Come on, guys, quiet down now, quiet down, the best part is coming up," and then Franklin throws popcorn in his hair.

ANOTHER MOVIE ABOUT PUBESCENT SEX

So this was the problem that confronted me as I began to watch *The Exorcist* and realize that it was not even faintly horrifying: to what extent does the film fail as a film, and to what extent was my failing to be frightened swayed by my certain knowledge that the devil does not exist? I've always felt myself capable of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief"; otherwise I would have to consign to the trash heap a full half of my library. Anyone who falls short of sadness when hearing the ghost of Hamlet's father plead "Remember me" needs to replace the battery in his chest. But I had my objective meter lying directly beside me: as soon as Katie took her face from the nook of my arm and began to watch the film with both eyes I knew that *The Exorcist* was not scary, that my skeptic's raised brow was not an interference to my being panicked by the world's mightiest horror movie.

It opens with overbearing sunlight in northern Iraq as Father Merrin, old and authoritative, excavates a ruin and comes across a statuette of Pazuzu, an unkind win-

géd god from the myths of Assyria and Babylon. Father Merrin then gets to feeling ominous and spots a scene or two that is supposed to hint at what lies ahead. For instance, two Dobermans grapple viciously: the devil and the exorcist—get it? Then you can forget about Father Merrin for the next hour; he won't return until the denouement. Instead, focus on another priest in Washington, D.C., Father Karras, an Italian with mommy problems (show me an Italian male *without* mommy problems). How do Father Karras's issues with his mother factor into the possession of the adolescent girl? They don't. Now turn to that girl, Regan, and her divorced mother, Chris, a Hollywood starlet filming on location in the D.C. area who has schlepped her daughter across the continent like so much luggage. (Just seven years after the release of *The Exorcist* another Reagan would make the same journey from Hollywood to D.C. and spread around some evil of his own.) Does Chris's status as a divorced Hollywood icon in any way contribute to the demonic possession of her daughter? Not in the least. She might as well be a mail carrier.

So why, then, does this twelve-year-old girl get hijacked by the devil? There's an almost-creepy scene in the attic that promises to suggest that the house might have something to do with the demonic takeover (à la *The Amityville Horror*), but that promise is promptly reneged. Soon Regan is whisked to an army of medical specialists, all of whom are baffled by her condition,

and then one suggests that the girl actually needs a priest instead of a doctor: a shameless endorsement of medieval reasoning. And now the fun stuff begins: her mattress becomes a rodeo steed and bucks her dramatically about; she levitates five feet above the bed because apparently the demon considers this an inspiring stunt of altered physics; she breaks out in boils, causes the room's temperature to drop to freezing, spiders across the ceiling, begins speaking the way Stevie Nicks sings, batters her hapless mum, and ejects vomit that resembles either cheap fluorescent paint or that clammy lime-colored glop you can buy in a plastic egg at the toy store.

Now for the film's most famous image, the scene I had been waiting for, the one I was sure would make me avert my eyes: Regan's head turning 360 degrees. Why should this be any more ridiculous than the girl's imitation of Spider-Man, or her levitating, or her speaking in tongues, or, for that matter, the entire premise of the story? One should very well expect chimerical shenanigans in a film about devil possession. But this particular scene was the moment at which I was nearly born prematurely in a movie theater. My mother once told me, "I thought for sure you were coming out right then and there." This is the scene that causes moviegoers to wince and cringe and bolt from the room.

Aristotle spoke of the superiority of the convincingly implausible over the unconvincingly plausible:

realistic, quotidian life rendered in a dully realistic manner is not preferable to an extraordinary, not-of-this-world situation rendered believably. *The Exorcist* makes clear that there are gradients to the impossible: Regan's levitation should be categorically not possible, and yet in comparison it seems more possible than her head becoming a merry-go-round. The reason for this is because *nothing else needs to result* from her levitation. She can simply plop back down onto the mattress and the magic show is over. But wouldn't a head turned 360 degrees—even a head turned by a supernatural maestro such as Satan—cause fountains of blood and the sound of cracking bone, and then leave one hell of a hack in the girl's neck? None of this happens, and I wished it had, because I would have found the scene less silly. It would have been more plausibly fantastical to spurt the blood, crack the bone, show the tear, and then simply have the tear vanish once the devil vacates the girl.

If I sound like a prig who just doesn't get it, I mean only to explain why this notoriously disgusting scene neglected to disgust me despite my *wanting* to be disgusted. *The Exorcist* ends with Father Karras's summoning of Father Merrin; the world-renowned demon-wrestler shows up and dies of a heart attack in the process of meeting his match. The possessed girl insults Father Karras's mother and the priest lapses into a blind fury. He begins beating the girl, which is apparently what she needed all

along, because the beating propels the thus far obstinate devil out of the girl and into... yes, into Father Karras himself, who promptly realizes what has happened and launches himself through the window. He dies mangled and bloodied on the concrete steps below, at which point, presumably, the demon flees to Vegas. The moral of the ending? When young girls misbehave, beat them savagely and they will straighten out.

In his book *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (2002), the scholar Darryl Jones has some bold assertions to make about *The Exorcist*, which he christens “one of the most extraordinary movies ever made, and one of the great aesthetic documents of the twentieth century.” Jones is impressed not by the theology of the film—all that satanic absurdity—but rather by the psychosexual currents that move powerfully just beneath the film’s unabashed advertisement for the priesthood. He is worth quoting at length:

What may ultimately be most disturbing about *The Exorcist* is the way in which the young girl’s body becomes a site of contested possession and control for all the film’s competing interests: the Devil, obviously, but also the various clinicians who attempt to treat Regan, and the exorcists themselves. Regan MacNeil is twelve going on thirteen: she is... on the cusp of adolescence; her body, undergoing puberty, is about halfway between child-

hood and adulthood.

So this movie is not really about a satanic takeover or the contest between good and evil? It’s about pubescent sex? Another movie about pubescent sex?

What the film does... is to allegorize the changing of the body and the (frequently terrifying) coming of adult sexuality in puberty—not for nothing does the film show Regan inserting a crucifix into her bleeding vagina... and to do so in a way which is, surprisingly, consonant with traditional Christian thinking on the flesh.

The Christian tradition contends that mankind carried its tainted flesh into the postlapsarian world—it was only the body that fell in Eden, not, thanks to Christ’s sacrificed body, the soul. Our carnal selves, along with everything in the material world (study the tenets of the Manicheans if you want to invoke melancholy), belong to the devil. No wonder Christians despise their bodies, those defecating sexual vessels with perpetual back and knee problems, always too fat or too thin.

Consequently, once Regan’s body becomes sexual, it becomes evil: the Devil, taking possession of her flesh, contorts, disfigures and scars it. But if the Devil is in an invasive relationship to Regan’s body, so too are the exorcists, who tie her to the bed... [to perform an]

ecclesiastical gang-rape.

An ecclesiastical gang-rape. Jones’s psychosexual reading of *The Exorcist* is more horrifying than any image in the film, and I find it enticing because it elevates the film above orthodox propaganda for the reign of Catholicism. Sex gets us in trouble: hard to argue with that.

THE VICIOUSNESS PERPETRATED BY COMMONPLACE PEOPLE

Anyone who has even a tepid interest in *The Exorcist* will know that the film’s sets in Manhattan and D.C. were apparently cursed: fire broke out, actors were injured, things went missing. If these accidents count as a curse I’m afraid curses are as common as childbirth. If Mephistopheles was present on the set of this movie he probably could have caused demolition more substantive than a stolen doughnut and some sprained wrists (although, true, fire is certainly a telltale sign of demonic presence; after all, the devil *lives* in it).

Critics took more than a tepid interest in the film when it was released on Christmas Day of 1973; reviews oscillated between the incredulous and the scared shitless. At the *New Republic*, Stanley Kauffmann proclaimed that it was the only frightening film he’d seen in years: “*The Exorcist* will scare the hell out of you”—not a particularly illuminating allegation. Vincent Canby at the *New York Times*

had a soberer view: “elegant occultist claptrap,” he called it, a “practically impossible film to sit through.” In *Rolling Stone*, Jon Landau opined that the movie is “nothing more than a religious porn film.”

In his short book *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), James Baldwin, sapient as ever, claims that the film is “afflicted with... pious ambiguity,” and at its core is “desperately compulsive, and compulsive, precisely, in the terror of its unbelief.” Baldwin refers here to the character of Father Karras, who at a critical junction in the story avers that his belief has gone the way of the plesiosaur. Satan soon comes around to wedge that faith back into place. Baldwin stresses dismay at the suggestion that the retribution visited upon an unbeliever is nothing less than damnation. He continues:

The Exorcist has absolutely nothing going for it, except Satan, who is certainly the star: I can say only that Satan was never like that when he crossed my path (for one thing, the evil one never so rudely underestimated me). His concerns were more various, and his methods more subtle. *The Exorcist* is not in the least concerned with damnation, an abyss far beyond the confines of its imagination, but with property, with safety... [with] the continued invulnerability of a certain class of people, and the continued sanctification of a certain history.

This is dead-on criticism as only Baldwin could write it: the

filmmakers are theologically illiterate, historically fatuous, socially adolescent. In his own life Baldwin encountered what Isaiah Berlin defined, in *Four Essays On Liberty* (1969), as the only true evils of our time: “injustice, poverty, slavery, ignorance.” Focusing on a crimson Pan with a pitchfork seems a perverse enterprise when real, life-destroying evil lurks in every pocket of the globe.

But I want to quibble with Baldwin on one point: he adapts Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase by saying that “the mindless and hysterical banality of the evil presented in *The Exorcist* is the most terrifying thing about the film.” Arendt created the phrase “banality of evil” while covering the trial in Jerusalem of that diminutive, ordinary man Adolf Eichmann, who was nevertheless responsible for the incineration of countless individuals. How could someone so quotidian in appearance and mentality be so evil, Arendt wondered. The answer: *because* he was an ordinary human. Take a look at Buchenwald; see what ordinary humans are capable of. However, there is nothing in the least quotidian about the figure of Satan or the situation of his commandeering the body of a young girl. They are the *opposite* of banal; they are mythological and ostentatious. The possession in the film certainly counts as “hysterical” but not, as Baldwin maintains, “mindless.” That which is mindless lacks navigation, objective, and although I agree that the arbitrary possession of Regan constitutes a malfunction

in storytelling, those who believe that Satan can literally enter people understand the objective: evil for evil’s sake, holding souls hostage to hurt God, to claim converts. Satan, like God, is both bitter and lonely; he does what he can.

Now here’s an example of arbitrary destruction that truly horrifies: Bryan Bertino’s 2008 film *The Strangers*. Easily the most disturbing horror movie (*terror* movie is more like it) I have ever sat through, *The Strangers*—with a nod to Sam Peckinpah’s sinister and sexual *Straw Dogs* (1971)—unfolds in a semi-isolated locale as three masked assailants invade a home and terrorize the young couple inside it. The male leader of the trio dons an ordinary item as a fearsome mask, nothing more than a white sack with tiny eyeholes cut into it. He and his two female companions—one of whom is tiny and clearly a teenager; at one point she glides creepily on a swing in the yard—spend two hours brutalizing the couple. They don’t speak to one another; they announce no intentions; they take no objects from the house. After those two merciless hours, the wife—who with her husband sits tied to a chair and bleeding to death—asks, “Why are you doing this to us?” And one of the women answers in a calm voice, “Because you were home.” The three attackers remove their masks; we don’t see their faces, but it makes for one of the most petrifying moments in the film: we know now that the couple will be butchered. The man plunges a knife into the gut of the husband,

and one of the women does the same to the wife. Then they simply drive off into the sunny morning in their American pickup truck.

The story is a masterpiece of sadism, an alert demonstration of the viciousness perpetrated by commonplace people. The potent fear generated by this film derives from the everyday believability of the predicament, the very real possibility that this can happen to you: no incubi or other paranormal nonsense, just three beef-eating Americans who want to terrorize and butcher innocent strangers because it offers them a quiet pleasure. I say “quiet” because the killers do not rejoice but rather go about the mission with a dignified meticulousness, almost as if killing is their job. Demonic spirits don’t exist, but savage human beings certainly do. We have more to fear from each other than we do from beyond or below. And that is the question you must ask when deciding to be or not to be horrified by *The Exorcist* or by reticent strangers who come to kill you for sport: what is your relationship to fear, to evil? Marguerite Duras combined them when she wrote, “Fear is my main point of reference. Causing fear is what constitutes evil.” And so the assailants in *The Strangers* are far more iniquitous than the fiend who rotates Regan’s head. Baldwin had reason to understand this better than most:

I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me: in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff... in the eyes of

some preachers, the eyes of some governors, presidents, wardens... and in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror.... [The devil] does not levitate beds, or fool around with little girls: *we* do.

Ah, yes, the devil in the eyes of presidents. The criminal demons of George W. Bush’s White House, Karl Rove and Dick Cheney chief among them, indeed possessed America, took over, climbed into the country’s soul, and how impossible it was to exorcise them, because, really, we didn’t want to, because we needed to punish ourselves for our own excess, our own stupidity. For this same reason the psyche needs Satan, his minions, his habitat; we need those metaphors to illustrate the horrors deep within us, the awfulness of being human. Who among us is capable of punishing himself *enough* for his own emotional crimes and shortcomings—for being Republican, or homosexual, or obese, or successful? I can never keep track of the intellectual weather that blows Freud in and out of town, but his theory of transference remains an impressive feat of understanding. We each of us carry the guilt of imperfection; hell exists because we imagined it into being, because we *want* it to be there, waiting, calling. We secretly suspect we *deserve* those torments. When that maniac Pope Gregory the Great devised the seven deadly sins in the sixth century he damned the world and all its corporeal splendor. He banished us to Hades for being put to-

gether not with belts and bolts but with bone and blood. What an unspeakable paradox: deny life so that you may live.

And what of the very real demons that each of us lugs around day to day, those clandestine demons instilled by our families, our childhoods, our choices? My mother divorced my father when my siblings and I were children. She fled from New Jersey to Manhattan with a millionaire banker, married him, denied her children as many times as Peter denied Christ, then lost her mind when the banker divorced her ten years later. She committed suicide with alcohol and pills just after Christmas, in 2007. We had maintained only sporadic contact over the years; I know that she tormented herself with guilt, with regret, and came to be quite alone in the world, unable to find another partner, her beauty fading, her bank account empty. This woman who had nearly given birth to me in a theater while watching a film about demonic possession would herself come to be possessed by her own mistakes, by devils that no priest—and, in her case, no doctor, no amount of time—could expel. ★