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The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films

Abstract
Horror film functions both as a threat and a catharsis by confronting us with our fear of death, the supernatural, the unknown and irrational, "the other" in general, a loss of identity, and forces beyond our control. Over the last century, religious symbols and themes have played a prominent and persistent role in the on-screen construction of this confrontation. That role is, at the same time, ambiguous insofar as religious iconography has become unhinged from a compelling moral vision and reduced to mere conventions that produce a quasi-religious quality to horror that lacks the symbolic power required to engage us at the deepest level of our being. Although religious symbols in horror films are conventional in their frequent use, they may have lost all connection to deeper human questions.

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Religion and the Proximity of Horror

The relationship between religion and film has always been a bit uncertain. From the very beginning, religious themes, stories, and metaphors were prominent in the cinema, at times taking on epic proportions and frequently carrying enormous symbolic freight. And yet rarely have films treated religious faith on its own terms or explored religious values and motivations with much depth and complexity (even and especially when they have been intentional in telling religious stories). This persistent yet ambiguous relationship between religion and film is nowhere more evident than in the case of horror films.

Other than pornography, horror is the film genre least amenable to religious sensibilities. It offends, disgusts, frightens, and features the profane, often in gruesome and ghastly proportions. Yet, from the earliest Faustian dramas to vampire legends and accounts of demon-possession to more recent apocalyptic nightmares, horror films have tended to rely heavily on religious themes, symbols, rituals, persons, and places. That is, of course, due (at least in part) to the fact that many of the central themes of horror films overlap with traditionally religious concerns (or at least Western religious concerns) such as sin and redemption, life after death, the struggle between evil and good, or the presence of the supernatural. Horror films frequently construct evil, for example, even if unconsciously, within familiar religious coordinates - and in the West that has

meant specifically Christian coordinates. With the disintegration of Christendom, however, these coordinates are increasingly losing their hold on the popular imagination. Whatever we may want to conclude about the unrelenting openness of the human to various modes of transcendence, to the spiritual, or to religious searching, the voice of religion in public discourse and its function in cultural artifacts such as popular film has been radically transformed. To complicate things further, our most basic understandings of self; community, and cosmos have undergone enormous alteration during the past century. To the extent that a Judeo-Christian worldview clings to more traditional notions of self, community, and cosmos, the rejection of these more traditional notions raises serious questions about whether a Western religious worldview can be sustained and, if so, what that might look like.

Not in spite of, but precisely for these reasons, horror films provide an important case study for thinking about religious meaning in contemporary culture. But, of course, horror is not widely respected as a serious partner for religious, theological, or philosophic reflection. Only three horror films surface in the recent AFI Top 100 list (*Psycho* at number 18; *Jaws* at number 48; and *Frankenstein* at number 87), and only three have ever even been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture (*The Sixth Sense* in 1999; *Jaws* in 1975, and *The Exorcist* in 1973). None has ever won. The recent surge in studies of religion and

film reflect this general disdain for horror film, and uniformly neglect any sustained consideration of the genre[1] while, at the same time, the recent spike in philosophical and psychological studies of the horror genre pay little focused attention to its explicitly religious dimensions.

In this essay, I will look briefly at just a few of the ways that religious questions and religious themes show up in the cinema of horror. In doing so, however, it is important to note from the outset that the breadth and complexity of horror film is not easily encapsulated in any single genre classification. Horror as a genre stretches across any number of different character types, locations, story lines, or time periods. Whatever value is to be found in thinking about horror film in terms of its recurrent patterns, common themes, or shared affects on audiences, therefore, entails certain risks that require a good deal of flexibility and humility. As Andrew Tudor reminds us, all genre is "a social construction and as such is subject to constant negotiation and re-formulation."[2] Every so often, for example, a film comes along that redefines the horror genre, stretches its boundaries, shocks us in new ways, or transforms existing conventions. Examples of such films would be *Psycho*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, or *Halloween*. It may be possible to identify some of the persistent features of horror films that help us to understand more about ourselves in terms of our primal fears and repulsions, our collective unconscious, or our buried

psyches. However, I take it that who we are both as selves and communities are always being formed in unique and context-dependent ways that alter our ways of knowing and our patterns of relating to one another. All of this requires that film changes, sometimes drastically, if it really is to speak to us and for us.

The success of horror as a popular art form is due in no small part to its ability both to attract and to repel -- to captivate, entertain, and invite us, on the one hand, and to confront us with that which is forbidden, unknown, strange, and terrifying, on the other hand. Horror preys upon our vulnerabilities, superstitions, nightmares, and fears.., and we like it! Or at least many of us do. Explanations for why this is so often take two forms: the quasi-religious ("awe") or the psychoanalytic ("repression").[3] But neither of these is fully sufficient in and of itself. When horror is at its best, it satisfies our curiosity about both the metaphysical and the psychological unknown while, at the same time, casting an unsettling light on the shadow elements both of the human condition and of the cosmos.

This dual movement in horror frequently reveals to us just how thin is the line that separates beauty and terror - and here, of course, is precisely its openness to the religious, what Otto called the mysterium tremendum et fascinans.[4] Horror film both interests us and disturbs us by confronting us with the disgusting and the fascinating simultaneously. Naturally, that which disgusts us and that which

fascinates us change over time, but horror remains, as filmmaker David Cronenberg describes it, "the genre of confrontation."[5] By functioning both as a threat and a catharsis, horror brings us face to face with our fear of death, of the supernatural, of the unknown and irrational, of' 'the other" in general, or a loss of identity, of forces beyond our control - regardless of whether those are to be found in outer space, in nature, in our bodies, in sexuality, beyond the grave, or deeply buried within our own psyches. How the religious figures in this confrontation is my focus here, and I shall be looking in particular at four dimensions of human experience where this confrontation occurs - (1) nature, (2) the psyche, (3) the body, and (4) the supernatural.

1. Horror from Nature

From as far back as *King Kong* (1933), horror films have capitalized on human fears of the natural order turning on us, whether it be plants, monkeys, ants, leeches, sharks, birds, dogs, bats, rats, bees, fish, earthworms, alligators, spiders, snakes, cockroaches, dinosaurs, or even swamp bacteria. The twentieth century witnessed advance after advance in our ability to understand and control nature, to harness and direct it. And yet for all that, nature remains unpredictable - a place of transcendence and mystery that can, with no advance notice, dwarf our intellects and punish our arrogance. Horror films capitalize on our increasing sense of alienation from the natural environment in the West, an alienation

embodied in a growing ecological crisis, and symbolized on film by nature in revolt.

This dimension of horror undoubtedly "works" in film because of our primal confidence that nature is actually quite benign. Accordingly, the moral subtext in many of these films is that when and if nature goes out of control, that is generally the fault of human beings who, through their own evil machinations (*Willard*, *Ben*), scientific experiments gone awry (*Piranha*, *Bats*), nuclear detonations (*Godzilla*), radiation (*Them!*), pollution, or greed, mistakenly attempt to alter, exploit, or contain and market nature (*King Kong*, *Jurassic Park*). Even the havoc caused by *King Kong* or *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, for example, is not really their own fault; they are both portrayed as "children of," rather than "mutations from" nature.[6] The arrogance of self-described "advanced" civilizations is that we forget our own ties to nature and inevitably do little more than plunder creation, turning it into our enemy.

But while many horror films presuppose and play off of our confidence in the benignity of nature, others chip away at that confidence or build upon the cracks in that confidence. Perhaps we humans will simply find ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time as when a hoard of migrating tarantulas are heading through town (*Kingdom of the Spiders*) or when our pet St. Bernard has been bitten by a rabid bat (*Cujo*). Some of the most powerful horror films in

history, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), call into question our confidence in nature by simply refusing to offer us any kind of explanation whatsoever for why their subjects go so uncharacteristically out of control. The net effect can be powerful indeed. There are people who, 25 years later, still refuse to wade too far out into the ocean.

In effect, nature functions in horror film as the turf of the gods, and terror is the human penalty for having trespassed on that turf by having become either so complacent or so obsessed that we fail to give it proper respect. Again, it is not that nature is evil, but rather that it cannot ultimately be predicted, harnessed, or exploited without horrifying consequences. In contrast to the clearly moral nature of evil that originates within the realm of the supernatural or the hidden recesses of the human psyche, nature's revolt is fundamentally amoral. Therefore, to the extent that a religion - say, Christianity, for example - has been reduced largely to a moral-cultural code, it is virtually impotent on this turf within the cinema of horror. Though in other horror contexts Christianity might offer a reservoir of images, narratives, and motifs that thematize evil and symbolize resistance against evil, it is helpless against threats posed by nature (though two of its secular counterparts in the West, science and the military, do manage to bring nature into check at times).

There is, however, within horror film an almost romantic interest in and fear of more "primitive" religious traditions in Africa and the Caribbean, among Native Americans, or even the early Egyptians - especially their "black magic" - an imagery that goes well beyond mere semantics in horror film, but describes the skin color of those who, over against the Whites, practice such magic. These religions are portrayed as having a keener respect for the forces of nature, as understanding its power and being careful to pay homage to its deities. While these more primitive traditions may, in some contexts, be feared by the Whites, they are also envied. Whites in horror films frequently experience the same threats and dangers as the "natives," but, as Michael Perez points out, "it is forbidden to the Whites to seek antidotes to their anguish in magic sources."[7] There is "neither remedy nor solace" for what Perez terms "the puritan despair.[8]

The Methods of Science. If nature can be construed as something like the turf of the gods in horror film, one of the primary vehicles by which we trespass on that turf is science. Thus, the threat we experience from nature is closely associated with a threat from science. The classic form of scientific horror is the gothic morality tale featuring a "mad" scientist who inevitably oversteps his bounds and thus stands accused of attempting to "play God," the archetypal instance of which is *Frankenstein* (1931). The mad scientist was extremely popular during the thirties and early forties in a number of low budget films

(many of them sequels) that starred the likes of Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, and Lionel Atwill - for example, *The Invisible Man*, *The Man Who Changed His Mind*, *Black Friday*, *The Raven*, *Doctor X*, *Man Made Monster*, or *Island of Lost Souls*. Though this particular sub-genre would become far less common after the 1950s, it continues to show up from time to time in films such as *The Fly* (1958), *The Brain that Wouldn't Die* (1963), *Re-Animator* (1984), *Flatliners* (1990) and, most recently, *Hollow Man* (2000).

In science-horror, the scientist is portrayed as "an outcast from the scientific community, a disaffected professional, staking his all on the one mighty scientific breakthrough that would redeem his reputation."[9] Though the mad scientist could be merely seeking revenge or using science as a means to some other evil end, many of the scientists in these films operate out of the most humane of intentions and are merely misguided in their search for truth, oblivious to the divinely imposed limits that have been placed upon knowledge.

The anxiety about science reflected in classic Gothic horror films tended to focus on those sciences that transgressed nature, usurped the power of God over matters of life and death, or failed to appreciate the reality of a divinely created and immortal soul. In fact, in an age when psychological explanations of the human self were beginning to gain ascendancy, what made the "mad psychiatrist" as suspicious a character as the "mad doctor" is precisely his failure

to recognize that what psychiatry calls the mind is really the soul (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Cat People*).

Classic science-horror makes an especially interesting case study in the tenuous relationship between religion and horror. On the one hand, Gothic science-horror constructed its anthropology within explicitly religious coordinates such as divine creation and the notion of an immortal soul. On the other hand, it is precisely the humanism of Gothic horror, increasingly as suspicious of religion as it was of science, that facilitated "the shift from the Neoplatonic and Judeo-Christian soul to the secular model of the psyche.[10] As Linda Badley notes, Gothic horror provided "an iconography, a process, and a mystique" for locating the sacred in one's inner, "true" self. It is this "buried self" as sacred text, rather than the Judeo-Christian scriptures that must be "studied, translated, invoked, and consulted."[11]

Despite the ubiquity, then, of explicitly religious images, symbols, and metaphors within Gothic horror films, these increasingly become little more than external markers or filmic conventions that lend an aura of transcendence while, in fact, the self - and therefore the threat to the self - is being relocated from metaphysics to psychology. Of course, the Freudian model did not escape a similar fate, having made the buried self both sacred and fantastic. In the horror cinema of our contemporary post-Freudian era, as the grand narrative of

psychiatry itself proves to be a quasi-religious explanation that must be rejected in the name of the embodied self, we are witnessing a new openness to religious interpretations of our situation. In the last year alone, films like *Bless the Child*, *The Cell*, *Lost Souls*, *End of Days*, *Stigmata*, and *The Sixth Sense* -- not to mention the re-release of *The Exorcist* -- all feature a heavy reliance on religious iconography as a way of marking the presence of the supernatural.

A New Openness. It may be too much to call this new openness to the transcendent or to the supernatural a "religious" openness, for it is not necessarily related to a renewed credibility on the part of traditional religious institutions or their belief, value, and behavioral systems. It is instead an openness to those dimensions of human experience that defy a rational or materialist explanation and that can perhaps best be described as "spiritual." But in our culture, traditional religious institutions hardly have much more of a leg up on engaging the spiritual than do any number of self-help groups, meditational and exercise practices, or even popular gurus such as Oprah Winfrey, whose "Remembering Your Spirit" portion of her show each week brings together food, mind, body, work, and relationships as a process of spiritual formation, and often claims more viewers than regular churchgoers in many mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. And yet when Hollywood wants to point to a spiritual or transcendent dimension to evil, it does not hesitate to employ large quantities of

religious symbols, often splattered together with no rhyme or reason -- a little Buddhism here, a little Christianity there, maybe an ancient book, or a crucifix thrown in for good measure, anything that will render a pseudo-religious feel to the portrayal.

Limitations of space prohibit a further inquiry into the relationship between religion, science, and nature in horror film; but there are a number of additional areas here worth exploring. For example, as science-horror moved away from the humanistic impulses of Gothic horror films, a whole new generation of films brought us face to face with evil in the form of entities from outer space (for example, *The Thing*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *The Blob*). These films were especially popular in the 1950s and 1960s, often signaling geo-political anxieties arising from a cold war mentality. They re-appeared with the blockbuster *Alien* in 1978, which set off a renewed interest in the alien-horror genre that has yet to diminish. The threat from outer space continues to capture the public imagination today and to function as a battleground for our engagement with the transcendent dimensions of horror. By portraying the inbreaking of alien forces, films such as the *Alien* series, *Screamers*, *Species*, *The Hidden*, or *The Borrower* symbolize a persistent supernatural dimension - a threat from forces above us and beyond us (or even

"below us" in the sea, as with Leviathan) - about which we know practically nothing and over which we have little or no control.

Interestingly enough, however, religious themes and symbols have generally played only a marginal role in alien-horror. While religious figures and institutions are frequently portrayed as playing a chaplaincy role to comfort victims of alien invasions or to offer sanctuary in which to hide, shudder together, and pray for help (*War of the Worlds*), broadly speaking, religion offers few resources to guide us in an encounter with aliens. After all, aliens just don't play by the same rules as we do, and it is not clear that traditional religious coordinates for thematizing evil would even apply to aliens anyway. For example, what effect could be had by waving a cross in front of "the Blob"? What evil lies within "the Thing" that a priest could exorcize? Would the creature from *Alien* shrink back and wince in pain if holy water were thrown its way? The futility of such actions also demonstrates, by the way, why religious iconography virtually disappears in psychotic "slasher" films where monsters with ordinary names like "Jason, Freddie, or Michael" belong to an extraordinary and even alien world where traditional conventions of sin and morality, good and evil, do not even come into play.

While older forms of science-horror may have largely disappeared, the fellowship between horror and science shows no signs of decline even as it

undergoes ongoing permutations based on contemporary fears associated with negotiating our identities in the context of fragmentation and a wide array of social and technological forces beyond our control, forces identified especially with the ascendancy of computer technology -- so that we get films like *Lawnmower Man*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Existenz*, or *The Matrix*, not to mention the success of the cable television "Sci-Fi" Channel.

2. Psychological Horror

Perhaps the most frightening of all horror films are those where there are no monsters and no demons other than the psychological states of the characters. As early as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) or *West of Zanzibar* (1928), horror had been associated with psychosis, inner compulsions, or insanity. Unlike the "mad scientist" of early horror films, however, the "madman" of later psychological horror was not a knowledge-seeking compulsive but a raging psychotic -- the victim, says Tudor, of monsters brought forth by the sleep of reason, not by its attraction.[12] In fact, it was precisely as the mad scientist was becoming less prominent in the 1960s that the tortured minds in *Psycho* (1960), *Peeping Tom* (1960), and *Repulsion* (1965) were becoming more prominent -- what has been described as "the trend from secure horror to paranoid horror."[13] This shift would accelerate in the 1970s and 80s, inevitably bringing forth the "mad slashers" of *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980).

This turn to psychological horror reflects and perhaps also contributes to significant alterations in religious meaning in American culture during that same period. Not only is the sacred no longer "somewhere out there" but rather "somewhere in here" (and thus the psyche is to be divined as a sacred text), so also evil is no longer "out there" but "in here." The monstrous dwells within the dark corners of the mind, repressed urges, and divided personality. One of religion's primary functions in establishing meaning and assigning value had been its ability to stake out the boundaries of good and evil, sacred and profane, saint and sinner (often by literally "staking" that which it deemed monstrous -- the witch, the communist, the homosexual).[14] Western religions traditionally did this in cosmological and, of course, theological terms with the net result that morality was imposed onto the human from outside. Thus, science had its divinely sanctioned limits, and the sacredness of certain "places" (the church, the home, the body, the family, etc.) was established by reference to the transcendent. But now with the turn from soul to ego, from priest to psychiatrist, from religious discourse to psychoanalysis, all religious bets are compromised.

In an earlier time, evil was absolute and threatened us from distant Transylvanian castles, haunted graveyards, or remote laboratories. Monsters could (a) be defeated through (b) group effort guided by (c) moral men equipped with (d) rationality, science, and knowledge that could (e) be put to use in predictable

ways. As Jonathan Lake Crane says, "the majority of monsters were enemies who helped men gain confidence in their ability to control and understand the world.[15] Religion provided the "sacred canopy" under which precisely this rational and moral exercise of human freedom could be counted on to defeat evil.

But the turn to the psyche as the site of the sacred required that evil be reoriented to new and more familiar contexts (schools, families, the suburbs). Horror had come home. Neither the supernatural, nor ghosts, nor demons were anywhere to be found. Now horror films taught us that our next-door neighbor might be the monster. All the rules begin to change: (a) this monster cannot be defeated; (b) all collective action aimed at doing so is bound to fail; (c) moral uprightness will get you nowhere (as Crane says, "Altruism of any sort is no longer rewarded in the horror film. Most slasher and gore films kill off even the most heroic and self-sacrificing protagonists";[16] (d) rationality, science, and expertise mean nothing; and (e) evil is completely unpredictable.

3. Body Horror

By the 1980s, as the modern notion of the psyche itself began to lose its credibility, it was the body that was made to pay the price. As Badley says,

The haunted house was the human body itself -- threatened at every turn, covered with tubes, cannibalized for cells, fluids, tissues, and parts, tortured and reconstructed on the procrustean bed of biotechnology. Haunted houses are always mazes and pilgrimages. Ours went from womb to tomb and contained spaces representing equal states of abjection: the patient and the corpse were choreographed identically; the living were undead, the dead wouldn't or couldn't lie down; the grim reaper and the resurrectionist wielded the same instrument, a saw/scythe.[17]

It is not as though the human body had never been disfigured before in earlier horror films, of course. But while these disfigurations could be created by mutations or by an inappropriate splicing of the human soul with alienated nature (*The Fly*, *The Alligator People*), more often than not these disfigurations emphasized the human spirit and were in reality disfigurations of the soul that made their way out onto the human form (*Cat People*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), thus providing the imaginative foil for a morality tale. One of the most interesting films in this regard is Tod Browning's *Freaks*, released in 1932, which requires that we identify not with those who are beautiful and otherwise "normal"-looking, but whose souls are clearly bent and misshapen. Rather we are directed to identify with Browning's real-life collection of bearded ladies, human worms, Siamese

twins, midgets, and pinheads who, though disfigured outwardly, point us toward the beauty and truth of the human spirit.

Gothic horror constructed also its understanding of death within this wider humanistic vision and the Judeo-Christian coordinates from which that vision arose. As with the classic medieval morality play which taught the Christian that the avoidance of sin and the living of an upright life would inevitably lead to final acceptance by God and the peace of heaven, so with Gothic tales of death, "to die in irredeemable sin".., to be unable to die and find peace and the possibility of heaven for the suffering spirit is the great danger...[18] Every defeat of a monster, every time evil was stopped in its tracks or a soul was released from the power of an ancient curse or a voodoo spell, peace was made on a cosmic or metaphysical scale. In one sense, death could even be embraced, and the rituals and myths by which it was embraced were public and communal.

In America, in the twentieth century, however, death changed hands. The symbols, the myths, and, indeed, the institutions that guided us in coping with and understanding death were transformed before our eyes. Death, once the special province of religion, now became the province of science, and especially medicine. As Badley says, "once intimately connected with the life of the community, death became separated from life by medical technology, which confined it to the hospital and the funeral home."[19] Horror in the last century

parallels this repression and eroticisation of, and inevitable fascination with, death. The assaults on the human body heralded by George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and, later, *Halloween* (1978) provide the new body language, the iconography, the communal rituals, if you will, for disposing of bodies that had been quietly kept out of sight, removed hygienically from the public eye, whose decaying flesh had been covered with leftover sacred deodorants but never buried. Romero brings home the corpses from Vietnam and deposits them on screen in front of us long before Oliver Stone's *Platoon* or Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. He calls his zombies "the blue collar monster"-"they're us," says one of his characters. And their bodies-- our bodies! -become "the central marker upon which we articulate the spectacular degradation of everyday life."[20]

4. Supernatural Horror

In an age that increasingly embraces a scientific worldview and the values of technology, not to mention the preoccupation with the body, the persistent fascination with the supernatural in horror film is somewhat astonishing. Over the last century, the threat of the supernatural has made its way onto the screen largely from three sources: (1) that which has died or is able to reach us from beyond the grave (ghosts, reincarnations, mummies, zombies, and vampires), (2) witchcraft and sorcery, and (3) the demonic and the Satanic.

Satan. Though there have long been films that featured demonic activity, devil worshippers, or appearances by Satan, the release of *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968 followed by *The Exorcist* in 1973 and *The Omen* in 1976 (as well as their inevitable sequels) marked a significant transformation in the horror genre, a new openness to the supernatural and to explicitly religious themes. More than half of all films made about Satan were released in the last twenty years, though admittedly many of these have been comedies such as the recent *Bedazzled*, *South Park* and *Little Nicky*. That in itself says something about the ambiguity of Satan as a symbol for anything like a real threat in our own time. *South Park* goes so far as to portray Satan as a homosexual, in an attempt to further trivialize the symbol by emasculating him.

The use of religious iconography to portray a supernatural threat is tricky. It frequently trivializes the threat by objectifying it. On the one hand, symbols such as Satan have proven themselves to be enormously resistant to dismantling from an increasingly materialistic ideology. In part, that is due to the fact that the projection of evil onto monsters or demonic persona frees the viewer from responsibility for evil. Dualistic accounts of evil in horror films, therefore, will most likely always find an audience. Evil is far more frightening and threatening, however, when it moves away from its thematization in the person of the devil or demons. The more ambiguous is evil in relation to good and the more evil falls

outside of comfortable dualities and binary oppositions, the more uncomfortable we are (the more frightened), so that the biggest part of the work of horror is its suggesting something to our imagination without beating us over the head with it.

In contemporary horror film, supernatural evil, especially that which features Satan and the demonic, became far more invasive, both paralleling and expanding that turn to the body that gave rise to slasher films. As Crane notes, supernatural horror films, though not as popular as slasher films, "seem more concerned with demonstrating that Satan and his cohorts can be just as violent as killers who have not directly ascended from the pit of Hell. Now, the Devil must compete for our attention not with God but with serial assassins."[21] *The Exorcist* is an especially fitting example of this, for while the references to Satan are chilling, they are made so by being located in the body of twelve-year-old Regan. As Linda Badley says, "In the 1980s, horror (whatever the medium) became a spectacle, offering not mere transcendence of the body but transcendence through the body."[22]

Vampires. In a number of ways, vampire horror has followed this same trajectory. Along with *Frankenstein*'s creature, the vampire is one of the two most powerful archetypal monsters of cinema, having appeared in early classics like *Nosferatu* (1922) and Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) as well as no less than 100 other such films in the past century.[23] Explicitly religious symbols (most of them

Christian) such as crosses, holy water, or eucharistic wafers have grown up around the vampire legend from the beginning. Indeed, as C. Fred Alford argues in *What Evil Means to Us*, given a dearth of symbolic resources for envisioning evil in our time, 'the vampire has replaced Satan as the leading figure of evil."[24] The vampire not only sucks from us our blood (and thereby our very "life force"), but willfully embraces evil, inverts normative patterns of valuation, and violates established institutions of family, religion, science, and law. The vampire defies cultural norms of femininity and masculinity (male vampires frequently exhibit a rather ambiguous masculinity) and transgresses heterosexual desire with an exchange of bodily fluids that is no respecter of gender (vampire films are often heavily erotic and at times homoerotic). By luring women away from the men who control them (fathers, husbands, priests), the vampire threatens the patriarchal structures of family, marriage, and religion.[25] At the same time, the vampire offers his victims a new birth - a new and immortal patriarchy in which he not only is the husband of numerous brides but father of countless "children of the night."

The vampire is an ambiguous figure in a number of ways - and increasingly so, as more and more films augment the humanity of the vampire while attempting to retain his or her destructive power. Vampires now are much more public about their bloodletting and body-ravaging. Two little pin-point

precision punctures in a neck just don't work. The body must be torn apart. Though vampires represent the threat of supernatural evil, they are at the same time tragic figures; they long for -- or literally "thirst for" -- humans. Though vampires symbolize the power of supernatural evil, horror films have always provided relatively clear handles on how we humans could thwart that evil. Interestingly, it is the scientist (epitomized in Professor Abraham Von Helsing) who knows the power of religious symbols as well as other more scientific techniques such as wooden stakes, mirrors, wolf bane, and exposure to sunlight. In fact, it is the scientist who usually has to teach the priest what to do, the latter being typically simple-minded, cowardly, and weak. Increasingly, however, crucifixes don't even work against vampires in the cinema of horror (as in the 1979 *Dracula*, or Wesley Snipe's *Blade*). We have come a long way indeed from the older vampire films where people would cross themselves at the mere mention of Dracula's name or the 1960 Hammer House production, *Brides of Dracula*, which features what has to be the most ridiculous ending of them all as Peter Cushing positions a windmill so as to cast the shadow of a cross directly on the vampire thereby killing him!

In general, the vampire is to be killed if we mortals are to find salvation; it is not the vampire who in any sense may be redeemed -- unless, of course, that vampire is in the hands of Francis Ford Coppola. His deep religious sensibilities

will not allow even Dracula, like the Godfather, to escape the possibility of redemption. And so it is that we get an even more ambiguous vampire. Coppola's treatment frames the Dracula story in an explicitly religious context. Vlad the Impaler loses his wife, blames God, and rejects the Christian faith, thrusting his sword into the heart of a huge crucifix from which gushes forth rivers of blood. Betrayed by God, he goes to war against all that is good, for he now has the ability not only to separate others from life, but from God. And yet, for Coppola, Dracula is ultimately a love story in which, through the sacrificial gift of a woman, Dracula can be cleansed and his evil forgiven. He even says, "It is finished," just like Jesus on the cross, as he dies.

Conclusion

Throughout the 20th century, horror film has relied more or less consistently on explicitly religious symbols, allusions, and themes. As we move into the 21st century, there are no indications that this reliance is diminishing; in fact, there is every reason to believe that it may be picking up new steam. And yet despite the resilience of the religious on screen, the form that the religious takes has been greatly altered by the processes and patterns of late modernity. What we find is an increasing marginalization of more traditional forms of the religious, and perhaps even the subversion of traditional religious symbols as an adequate cultural form for addressing questions of self, world, meaning, and values. It

could even be argued that horror as a genre represents a loss of confidence in the institutions associated with the religious. While explicitly religious markers (priests, crucifixes, Satan, demons, etc.) are conventional in horror film, they are merely conventions -- unhinged from a compelling moral vision and lacking the symbolic power required to engage us at the deepest level of our being and to shape our values and behavior. As Reinhold Zwick says,

> Even if their focus is secular, films like to play with the thoughts and image arsenals of religious denominations and thereby achieve -- at least on the surface -- the (pseudo-) religious, (pseudo-) mythical touch that is so commercially successful today. Of course, one can also use other classical motifs to give numinous evil a concrete form. One that is especially well-liked is the motif.., where the "dark side" of an individual is personified in the outside world in the form of an opposing oder Doppelganger character...[26]

This does not mean that religious questions have ceased to show up in horror film, but they rarely show up where religious stories and religious symbols are overt. So, for example, while on one level *The Exorcist* is a far more "religious" film than *Night of the Living Dead*, it is the latter that raises more questions about evil without ever employing religious imagery. *The Exorcist*, on the other hand, is a mere spectacle of evil, that intends (as William Blatty himself says) to communicate the notion that supernatural evil exists and that, therefore, so also must supernatural good. Instead the film ends up scaring us, but communicating neither of these notions at a very deep level.

The persistence of the religious in cinema has no necessary relationship, then, to whether religion is on the rise or in decline in our culture. The mere fact that horror films rely heavily on religious symbols and stories as mere conventions to scare the hell out of us does not make a case for religious vitality in our culture; in fact, their persistence eviscerated of any deeper connections to our lived questions may be a good example of the decline of the religious in our culture.

Whether this ambiguity in the case of religion and horror film parallels larger dynamics in our culture with regard to religion requires more correlation than this brief essay will venture. A good argument could be made, however, for the fact that the role of religion in United States culture reflects precisely this same ambiguity. On the one hand, religion in America is clearly not in the kind of decline expected by proponents of the secularization thesis in the late 19th - and early 20th - century. On one level, secularization, defined by Peter Berger in 1967 as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols,"[27] has clearly been taking place in our culture at an ever-quickening pace. At the same time, however, there appears to be no decline in the openness of people to religious or spiritual matters. In the United States, for instance, polls show that while 44 percent of the population is "unchurched,"[28] close to 90 percent believe religion is very

important or fairly important. About half describe themselves as religious, while another 30 percent describe themselves as "spiritual." 86 percent say they believe in God, and that number rises to 94 percent when belief in a "universal spirit or higher power" is included.[29] In a 1994 U.S. News and World Report survey, about 61 percent believe Jesus Christ will return, and according to a 1994 USA Today/CNN/Gallup survey, 90 percent believe in heaven, 72 percent believe in angels, and 65 percent believe in the devil. On another level, then, what we see in the United States is a good example of the fact that, as Berger now says, our world "is as furiously religious as ever, and in some places more so than ever."[30] Secularization is an ambiguous reality.

Of course, the persistence of personal religious beliefs does not adequately describe the social significance of religion in America. It could be that religious beliefs have become so privatized, so disconnected from predominant social behaviors, political attitudes, and public life, and so expressed in terms of contemporary secular values, that the social significance of religious faith is minimal. Or at least it is on a par with other sorts of voluntary activities and associations (Kiwanis, "twelve-step" groups, Tai Chi) that, along with religion, provide a loosely organized, non-institutionalized, highly selective, "spiritual" framework in which human beings in late modern America live, move, and have their being.

At the same time, merely because "the religious" is increasingly marginalized in film does not mean that religious questions do not show up in horror film. This includes questions regarding sin and redemption, guilt and forgiveness, the meaning of our lives (if any) beyond death, good and evil, and the question of God. Nor should we conclude that because horror film is preoccupied with visions of evil, it is therefore nihilistic or anti-religious. In fact, just how evil is constructed on film may be of more interest than how good is, and, thus, the contemporary renaissance of evil may be viewed as an openness to the religious and a rejection of those "patterns of interpretation that wanted to dissolve evil completely into social and psychological explanations."[31] As Frederic Jameson notes, "forms of the good are notoriously more difficult to construct, and generally draw their light from the darker concept, as though the sun drew its reflected radiance from the moon."[32] But clearly the kinds of questions that religion wants to ask -- questions, for example, such as whether we should do something just because technology makes it possible to do something -- are not best served by the types of horror film in which evil is reduced to mere spectacle and the religious is employed as little more than a convention to enhance the entertainment value of that spectacle.

At its worst, horror film becomes a merely cathartic device that satisfies our curiosities about death and evil in a way that is designed to do no more than

provide us pleasurable sensations. It then does not really "confront." As Zwick points out, "despite all of the evil that washes out onto the viewer[s] from the screen, [they] will, only in the rarest of cases, go home in a state of agitated thought about guilt and forgiveness, freedom and responsibility. Instead, the viewer is given the pleasant happy ending or the genre-typical continuous existence of evil (leaving the door open for a sequel)."[33] At its best, however, horror films do more than merely “re-present evil" but instead allow it also to confront us.

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[1] Not one of the following books directs any focused attention on the horror genre or takes up the analysis of specific horror films:

Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993);

Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph Over Shame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998);

Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000);

Clive Marsh and Craye Ortiz (eds), *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997);

John R. May (ed.), *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Films* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992);

John R. May (ed.), *New Image of Religious Film* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1997);

Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996);

Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams & Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994);

Sara Anson Vaux, *Finding Meaning at the Movies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); and

Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. Though the films *Alien* and *Aliens* are treated in this last-listed book, they are critiqued primarily with regard to gender issues rather than any religious dimensions.

[2] Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 6.

[3] Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[4] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2nd ed., 1950).

[5] "The Horror Film: Supernature, Science, & Psyche," National Library of Australia, 1996 (http://www.cinemedia.net/NLA/horror.html).

[6] T. J. Ross, "Introduction," *Focus on the Horror Film* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 7. In fact, as an attempt to establish the continuity between humans and the creature from the black lagoon, the film begins with a quotation from Genesis 1:1, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," followed by the more Darwinian statement that the earth then cooled down for billions of years, and as the land emerged from the waters, so did humans. All bases are covered.

[7] Michael Perez, "The Puritan Despair," *Focus on the Horror Film* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 134.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ross, "Introduction," 5.

[10] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 21.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 185.

[13] Ibid., 184.

[14] Edward J. Ingebretsen, "Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance," *Religion and American Culture* 8: I (Winter, 1998), 91-116.

[15] Jonathan Lake Crane, *Terror and Everyday Lore: Singular Moments in the History of Horror Film* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 11.

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[16] Ibid., 12.

[17] Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, 6.

[18] H. W. Dillard, "The Pageantry of Death," *Focus on the Horror Film* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 37.

[19] Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, 22.

[20] Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life*, 160.

[21] Crane, *Terror and Everyday Lore*, 21.

[22] Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, 9.

[23] Interestingly enough, the decade of the 1970's produced about a quarter of all vampire films.

[24] C. Fred Alford, *What Evil Means to Us* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 13. Alford goes on to argue that the vampire is only capable of stealing our blood, not our souls, and, therefore, as a symbol of evil, is far more shallow and far less grandiose than that of Satan. But see Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Dead* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), who argues effectively that the vampire is a far more complex and powerful symbol of evil than Alford allows.

[25] Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 143.

[26] Reinhold Zwick, "The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film," trans. Stephen Uppendahl, in John R. May, ed., Ne*w Image of Religious Film* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 80.

[27] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 107.

[28] This statistic, according to the Gallup Organization, has remained relatively unchanged for the last 20 years. This statistic, according to the Gallup Organization, has remained relatively unchanged for the last 20 years. Cf. Michael Lindsay, "Unchurched America Has Changed Little in 20 Years," Gallup News Service, March 28, 2000.

[29] Gallup Organization, copyright 2000 (http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indreligion4.asp").

[30] Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

[31] Zwick, "The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film," 72.

[32] Fredric Jameson, "'The nostalgia mode' and 'Nostalgia for the present'," in *Postmodern After-images: A Reader in Film, Television, and Video* (London: Arnold, 1997), 29.

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[33] Zwick, "The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film," 83.