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The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief

Sena Nurhan Duran

University of Michigan, sduran@umich.edu

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The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief

Abstract

This is a book review of Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

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Author Notes

Sena Nurhan Duran is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of American Culture with certificates in Women's and Gender Studies and Film, Television, and Media Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her research attends to productions of racialized sexuality, gender, and Islam in US film history.

Laycock, Joseph P. and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

In this compelling contribution to the scholarship of cinema history and religious cultures, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* assesses the intricate relationship between American religious practices and experiences and the popular cultural site of the supernatural horror film. Expanding on their other collaborative scholarship, authors Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson utilize a historical survey of the last fifty years of American horror cinematic production, reception, and American religious cultural history to outline a critical connection between supernatural horror and popular religious belief. Contending with arguments that deny any form of causal relationship between supernatural representations on screen and the beliefs and practices of audiences or attributions of a linear and direct causal structure—wherein, for instance, the depiction of demonic possession on screen becomes neatly adopted by a passive audience for years to come—Laycock and Harrelson critically assess a cyclical and dialogic process they term, “*The Exorcist effect*.” Named after the groundbreaking 1973 horror film directed by William Friedkin, where the contemplation of faith, Catholicism, and demonic possession came to influence American attitudes towards and practice of exorcisms in the decades that followed, “*The Exorcist effect*” characterizes the relationship between “supernatural horror films¹ with [religious] belief and practices related to supernatural” (17) as dynamically

interwoven in the form of a feedback loop. Laycock and Harrelson delineate this feedback loop throughout their study as one wherein a.) real-world events serve as the inspirational basis of horror films, which in turn b.) variably shape how audiences come to make sense of the world and offer new frameworks for articulating religious and supernatural beliefs and experiences, which then c.) results in events, practices, or scripts that come to inspire new supernatural horror films, restarting the cycle (11). At the center of this identification, the authors aim to expand the understanding of American religious practice and lived experience by seriously considering the place of popular culture—especially in the form of the supernatural horror film—within it.

Reflecting the dynamic and multi-textual modes through which “*The Exorcist* effect” operates, Laycock and Harrelson’s objects of analysis include expansive case studies of supernatural horror films produced between 1968 and 2023 and the events, movements, and religious practices and beliefs that inspired and came to be inspired by the movies in question. These studies utilize an effectively multimethod approach that broadly deploys textual analysis of the films’ supernatural content and an impressive survey of paratextual material and popular and religious discursive responses while also locating belief formation processes within specific American cultural contexts. By reading source materials such as archived statements in alleged satanic murder trials to excavate logics of assessment and accusation stemming from tropes popularized in horror films (as in the case of

their eighth chapter), Laycock and Harrelson provide a thorough and roughly chronologically organized historical survey of “*The Exorcist* effect,” through mid-20th to early 21st-century America and simultaneously exemplify the use of “*The Exorcist* effect” as a mode of analysis.

The authors’ call to consider a dialogic relationship between supernatural horror films and American religious practices and beliefs is advanced in their second chapter, “How Horror Movies Become Real.” Here, Laycock and Harrelson outline a detailed review of literature theorizing the potential mechanisms through which films, even those whose subject matter is fictitious, may influence individual and collective belief structures. Arguing that horror films are especially preoccupied with the question of truth, this chapter draws from film studies, psychology, and affect theory to assess how genre, narrative, and medium inform the supernatural horror film’s place “as an analogue to reality [that shapes] our ideas of *what is possible*” (21). Within this framework, the supernatural horror genre’s destabilization of an assumed reality of being, the cinematic narrative deployment of “veracity mechanisms” (borrowed from Markus Altena Davidsen’s study of supernatural fiction), such as the interspersing of clips of ‘real’ persons or events throughout the film, transtextual links to published scholarship or religious texts like the Bible, and the effects of the horror medium on audience somatic responses and confabulated memory, are identified as modes through which films may potentially influence religious beliefs and attitudes. Drawing upon the folklore

studies theory of ostension, the phenomenon by which “stories [manifest] into action” (35), Laycock and Harrelson further emphasize the potential for horror films to serve as scripts to be variably acted out or absorbed within behaviors and practices, as in the case where fictionalized satanic ritualistic depictions in film were taught in informational seminars for police officers during the Satanic Panic to identify cult activity (26).

The ensuing chapters track the processes of “*The Exorcist* effect” through six case studies, and it is within the organization and method of analysis exhibited in these chapters that the impressive breadth and significance of the authors’ theoretical model are especially highlighted. In chapters four and five, for instance, the authors explore three critical figures in American paranormal and demonological history: paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren (whose careers and writing have served as the inspiration for numerous horror films, including *The Conjuring* franchise), and author of disputed nonfiction books on exorcisms and Catholic demonology, Malachi Martin. Within these chapters, the authors examine these figures’ work to reveal how their alleged factual accounts of demonic possession, paranormal investigation, and American hauntings explicitly borrowed from the visual and linguistic scripts of established horror cinematic productions. Made legible and popular among audiences due to the precedent intrigue of supernatural horror films during the period, Laycock and Harrelson explore how their work served as the basis for subsequent horror films, deftly

revealing the cyclical production of “*The Exorcist* effect.” The attention to the cultural impact of the Warrens and Malachi Martin on the American public religious imagination of demonic possessions, hauntings, and exorcisms expands in their identification of horror films as having “functioned as a form of mass media that introduced the public to scripts for demonic possession” (134) as well as scripts for identifying supernatural phenomena writ large. Within this framework, Laycock and Harrelson utilize film textual analysis in conjunction with various archival production, reception, and cultural discursive sources such as court cases and news reports to identify how horror films have affected religious imagination, practices, and interpretation of events. In their third chapter, the authors employ these mechanisms to analyze the “Unholy Trinity” of supernatural horror films in the 1960s and 1970s: Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist*, and Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976). The strength of this chapter emerges in the authors’ meticulous consideration of each film within the cultural contexts of their production and especially in their employment of veracity mechanisms, which impacted how audiences interpreted sections of the film as fact, as parallel to the particular currents of American social and cultural life, or as reliable sources of religious text and prophecy.

The last three chapters of the monograph broaden the scope and significance of “*The Exorcist* effect” by exploring its remarkable breadth and levels of cultural entanglement through the study of three critical religious practices and moral

debates through the late 20th century: the global increase of performed exorcisms and belief in demonic possession, the American Satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s, and the moral outcry over heavy metal music. Laycock and Harrelson thread their analytic model through the historical survey of these practices and cultural moments—which would also serve as valuable introductions for unfamiliar readers—and reveal remarkable sites of cyclical involvement between film, belief, and event. Perhaps by the very nature of the subject matter, the most successful contributions are also some of the most haunting, as in the reading of details in the 2011 “200 Demons House” case through the frame of quasi-ostension of horror cinematic scripts in the sixth chapter, and their conclusion by way of a striking discussion of the contemporary modes of “*The Exorcist* effect” within the context of social media through a reading of the conspiracy theory and political movement QAnon.

Informed by film studies, religious studies, and theoretical methods drawn from psychology and folklore studies, Laycock and Harrelson succeed in revealing the dynamic entanglements between supernatural horror films and the American religious landscape. By urging scholars of religion to recognize the place of supernatural horror films within the cultural milieu of American religion on the one hand and horror film scholars to seriously consider religion and religious belief in their study of cinematic text and audiences on the other, this text is also an essential call for expansive interdisciplinarity. That the authors conclude by way of pressing

increased literacy as the solution to “*The Exorcist* effect,” calling for “a greater awareness of how [we] know what [we] know” (241), reflects the stakes of their approach to horror, film, and American religion, which emphasizes comprehensive and dialogic ways of thinking. Though some readers may find the study of horror films limiting or over-determined, the authors do not claim that horror films are the only contributors to developments in American religious practice and belief (nor that the solution to detrimental or violent consequences is the censorship of films). Instead, Laycock and Harrelson’s work is an especially salient and productive model for researchers interested in the broad interrelationships between religious belief, cinema, and popular culture. Scholars of horror films and religion outside of the US context (including those interested in non-Catholic practices and contexts, though that is the predominant subject of this study) and those interested in film studies methodologies that engage in textual, paratextual, and transtextual objects of analysis will also find this work exceptionally useful. The clarity of its methods and prose and its nuanced approach to studying religion, culture, and film make *The Exorcist Effect* an invaluable source for both students and professors interested in religious studies, popular culture, the horror film, and American religious history.

¹ By “supernatural horror,” the authors refer to a genre of horror film whose central conflict is epistemological in nature, where both characters and audience are forced to determine “what is real and [question] what we thought was real” (14). By this definition, the “supernatural horror films” discussed in this text are predominantly involved in the subject of demonic or satanic existence and possession and paranormal activities typically attributed to demonic presence.