

1-2010

'Evil against Evil': The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*

Larrie Dudenhoefter

Kennesaw State University, ldudenho@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/facpubs>

 Part of the [American Film Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dudenhoefter, Larrie. "'Evil against Evil': The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*." *Horror Studies* 1.1 (2010) 73-88.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Horror Studies
Volume 1 Number 1

© 2010 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/host.1.1.73/1

LARRIE DUDENHOEFFER
Kennesaw State University

'Evil against Evil': The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*

ABSTRACT

This essay examines and deconstructs three sets of antagonisms in William Friedkin's The Exorcist (1973). It argues that the film describes its own narrative conflicts as a thematics of 'evil against evil,' so as to de-ethicize the moral violence of those metaphysical dogmatisms that compete over the 'souls' of others. It then re-couches the one-sidedness of scientific and religious orthodoxies, which damage in similar ways Regan MacNeil, one of the film's main characters, as another variation of this thematics. Finally, this essay suggests that The Exorcist surveys certain sociopolitical tensions, thus commenting, in its video and theatrical re-releases, 'timelessly' on US tensions with its own counterculture and with the Middle East. The film 'transcends' such mutually destructive tensions in its dramatization of 'sacrifice,' though without taking this term in its soteriological sense; 'sacrifice' rather involves the reduction of these thematics to Regan's flesh—involves reversing their anagogic tendencies—so that this flesh at once re-emerges as the site and the template of the film's narrative contestations.

KEYWORDS

radical evil
dedifferentiation
recontextualization
narrative space
taut-ontology
ahistorical fantastic

If you're asking if I believe in the Devil, the answer is yes – yeah, that I believe.

William Peter Blatty, deletion from *The Exorcist* (1973)

Our difficulty in believing in the – for want of a better word – political inspiration of the Devil is due in great part to the fact that he is called up and damned not only by our social antagonists but by our own side, whatever it may be [...] Political opposition, thereby, is given an inhumane overlay which then justifies the abrogation of all normally applied customs of civilized intercourse. A political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence.

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953)

Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise.

John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938, original emphasis)

INTRODUCTION

The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973), with its 2000 anniversary reissue, seems more relevant than ever since the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The film sets its introduction in Nineveh, where Father Lankester Merrin, clergyman, archaeologist, and sometime exorcist, unearths an image of the demon that menaces 12-year-old Regan MacNeil later in the film. The relic seems out-of-context to Father Merrin, much as tales of exorcism and demonic influence seem out-of-context for twentieth century Washington, D.C., where actress Chris and Regan MacNeil live at the time of the film's action. Father Merrin scrutinizes the artefact, and then offers us a summary of the film's theodicy: 'evil against evil,' an inscription on the artefact that Merrin translates. This moment, and its redefinition of terms in the traditional 'good versus evil' formula, sets the ideological tenor of the film's narrative, making Father Damien Karras's sacrifice at its conclusion meaningful as a transcendence of this formula. *The Exorcist* favours sacrifice over confrontation as a moral stance, arguing that confrontation creates mutual antagonism with morally, socio-culturally, and epistemologically disastrous results. It identifies 'good versus evil' as an ultimately 'evil against evil' relationship of terms, thus forcing its audience to rethink its confidence in its moral, political, and medico-religious views. *The Exorcist* thus functions as a parable that teaches us the value of sacrifice on a transnational scale; a lesson valuable for Americans at a time when Muslims and Christians war with each other while calling each other 'evil' in an attempt to invoke divine sanction for their actions.

Unfortunately, most criticism of *The Exorcist* ignores, misreads, or glosses over the film's reevaluation of 'good and evil' nomenclature. In fact, most criticism sees the film as a reaffirmation of these dichotomous terms: a development indicative of and responsible for our culture's 1980 and 2000 oscillation to conservatism, which reduces the complexities of two wartime eras, the sexual revolution, and the emergence of new wave feminism to a more accessible

formula (one with a causative scapegoat in the Devil's influence on our children). As Mark Kermode argues,

[The] solutions *The Exorcist* appeared to offer were oddly reassuring for those who longed for a return to an absolute moral order. For here on screen was a clear-cut struggle between good and evil in which priests, policemen, good mothers, and devoted sons fought a righteous battle to release rebellious, parent-hating children from the grip of a lustful, all-consuming devil.

(Kermode 2003: 9–10)

The language Kermode uses to describe the Devil – 'lustful', 'rebellious', and 'all-consuming' – associates 'evil' with the sexual, political, and generational iconoclasm of 1970s' counter-culture. In contrast, the language Kermode uses to describe 'priests, policemen, and mothers' associates 'good' with 'order,' a sense of righteousness, and reactionary thinking. The language *The Exorcist* uses, though, recasts these forces as narrow, destructive, and 'evil' in their inimicality. Although Mark Jancovich seems to detect this strain of reevaluation in the film, he nevertheless carries Kermode's interpretation of the film further, decrying its

remarkably crude conservatism which distinguishes it from more general developments in the genre. It does present the forces of order and chaos as being indistinguishable from one another within the modern world, but it does so specifically to establish the need for traditional forms of religious authority. [...] The modern world is presented as a kind of permissive hell which is now open to the invasion of demonic forces, especially since the Catholic Church has given up the concept of evil and come to rely on sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis.

(Jancovich 1992: 93–4)

Kermode and Jancovich, in their inaccurate assessment of the film's conservatism and moral reductiveness, enable the film to subsume their criticism as an example of 'evil against evil' confrontation; since these men resort to a formula they fail to identify the major shortcoming of the film – the 'evil' of its political fallout as they see it. *The Exorcist*, though, in its first scenes, oversteps this criticism, instructing its audience to resist any dogmatist evaluation of its content, cultural work, and resonance.

Jancovich's criticism, though, informs other distillations of the film's subtext into easier-to-take forms. Allison M. Kelly, for example, sees *The Exorcist* as a tacit recuperation of the audience's faith in scientific authority, envisioning Father Merrin as the ultimate father figure: one that satisfies Regan MacNeil's Oedipal search for one and otherwise mitigates the disruptiveness of non-traditional family structures:

Behind the scenes of vomiting, levitation, guttural insults and rotating heads in *The Exorcist* lies a much deeper threat: the demon might be manifesting itself because of Regan's family situation: a bitter divorce, a deadbeat dad [...] and a career-obsessed mother.

(Kelly 2004: 64)

This specimen of criticism more than resembles Jancovich's reductive take on the film's moral commentary; it *reaffirms as salutary* conservative modes

of thinking and organization to thus make the film defensible – a form of ‘tough love’ for the audience, our culture, and its characters. It enlists science to neutralize the film’s challenging ‘evil against evil’ theodicy, even though the film clearly makes medical and psychiatric examination seem as invasive, fetishistic, and torturous as demonic influence – or anything else in the closets of Catholic doctrine. It ignores once more the film’s critique of strict allegiance to a set of extremes, whether ‘good or evil’ or ‘faith or science,’ as symptomatic in any case of a mutually destructive opposition.

Of course, we cannot ignore *The Exorcist’s* critique of scientism, as we cannot likewise narrow our focus to the film’s construction of faith and spirituality. Robert F. Geary, though, in shifting away from Kelly’s analysis, falls into the temptation of couching an ontological discussion of the film in dichotomous terms:

The Exorcist is a work *about* deep horror, about the lure of a nihilistic sense of meaninglessness which arises from human suffering and death and can break the human spirit. But it is not a work *of* deep horror; instead, it tells the story of heroic and successful resistance to deep horror.

(Geary 1993: 62, original emphasis)

This language of ‘resistance’ threatens to recast ‘good and evil’ in other terms: ‘good’ translates into ‘heroic’, ‘successful’, and reactionary (in two senses of that term), whereas ‘evil’ translates into nihilism, ‘death’, ‘suffering’, and ‘deep horror’, or that which unnerves, unsettles, or makes hellish or rebellious, in Kermodé’s and Jancovich’s language. Much as with Kelly, faith, the vehicle for long-range meaningfulness, for Geary seems a means of overturning the film’s entreaties not to resist, but to transcend ‘evil’ confrontations in line with Christ-like sacrifice. This theodicy is unattractive to critics and audiences who take umbrage at the suggestion of turning the other cheek, especially in art, in the horror genre, and even in light of the film’s wartime contexts.

We must therefore focus on *The Exorcist’s* introduction, which establishes its cultural, ethical, and narrative mission statement, as a way of understanding the film, as well as its cultural contexts, and its mediation of our tendencies to war. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray define a parable as ‘a short, realistic, and illustrative story intended to teach a moral or religious lesson’ (Murfin and Ray 1997: 265). *The Exorcist*, with its religious overtones, conforms to this definition, in that it unsettles world views that conceive of existence in dichotomous terms, as a Manichean contest of the forces of good and evil. *The Exorcist* redefines this contest as ‘evil against evil’; this thrust of the film collapses three main dichotomies, all of them American favourites, especially since the George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq:

1. *The Exorcist* collapses metaphysical dichotomies, especially the audience’s temptation to view Father Merrin’s struggle with the Devil in terms of Manichean ‘good and evil’ absolutes. The film rather defines these forces as extremes that threaten the lives, consciences, and emotional wellbeing of Regan MacNeil, Chris MacNeil, and Father Damien Karras.
2. *The Exorcist* collapses epistemic dichotomies, especially the tensions of faith and science in the American consciousness. The film invokes the catechistic terms of *superstition* and *irreligion* to define faith and science as extremes that cannot alone offer us a complete, realistic, or salubrious understanding of the world.

3. Finally, *The Exorcist* collapses (geo)political dichotomies, redefining liberal and conservative dogma as another variation of 'evil against evil'; conservatives who see a recrimination of the moral looseness of the 1960s in the film court opposition from liberals who see in it a recrimination of moral and institutional repressiveness. The film implies that these stances result in a mutual and continuous animus, terrorization, and destructiveness.

The Exorcist, since its 1973 release, thus seems a timely anticipation of Iraqi/American, Christian/Muslim, and theocratic/democratic tensions, warning us to eschew self-righteousness, rethink dichotomies in our technocratic and military-industrial schemes, and emphasize sacrifice as a way of transcending our more treacherous moral, social, cultural, and political imperatives. Ironically, the film uses Regan's flesh to explore this 'transcendence' and to materialize its 'evil against evil' thematics – in other words, the film recasts a series of oppositions as tautological and, at core, reducible to the most sensori-active levels of our being, or the film rather recasts these oppositions as what we might describe, in a much too vulgar display of neologism, as altogether *taut-ontological*.

METAPHYSICAL THEMATICS: 'WHAT AN EXCELLENT DAY FOR AN EXORCISM!'

William Peter Blatty, the screenwriter for *The Exorcist*, expresses concern over certain misinterpretations of the film in an interview for its twenty-fifth anniversary DVD release: 'I don't want them [the audience] to think that the devil won'. He refers to the film's conclusion, where, after Father Merrin dies off-screen while alone with Regan MacNeil, Father Damien Karras invites the demon into himself, and then throws himself out of a window, sacrificing himself for Regan's sake. In short, the exorcism fails, at least in its confrontation with the demon. Kermode thus reports that after the film's release Blatty and Friedkin 'were shocked to learn that audiences were interpreting the finale as negative, a victory of evil over good' (Kermode 2003: 83). Moreover, televangelist Billy Graham thought that a demon or 'evil' entity actually made its way into *The Exorcist's* film stock. Even later, critics like Thomas S. Hibbs argue that *The Exorcist* glamorizes evil. These responses to the film once more violate its theodicy: the transcendence of confrontation and 'good versus evil' Manichaeism in line with the Catholic Church's teachings on evil.

The Catholic catechism discusses the existence of evil in terms of a 'mystery of lawlessness': one that acknowledges the 'reality of sin' and offers no solutions as to its origins, its activeness, or the reasons for God allowing its continuation. However, the catechism also claims that Adam's fall and Satan's duplicities in the Book of Genesis result in Christ's rise, truth, and sacrifice, offering us 'blessings' greater than those Adam and Eve lost (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1995: 108–9). Likewise, the demon in *The Exorcist* (in a woman's form) costs a family its innocence, works to sexually vitiate others, and takes the lives of three men, Merrin, Karras, and Burke Dennings, Chris MacNeil's director and love interest. It also offers Karras a chance at redemption, renews the faith of the MacNeils and the audience – Regan kisses Father Dyer at the film's denouement – and reaffirms the value of sacrifice as a truer form of exorcism: one that *invites* the audience to rethink 'combat' ideologies in matters of faith, ethics, and supernaturalism.

The scene in Nineveh describes these ideologies as 'evil against evil', in that they subsume Manichean oppositions and misrepresent the Christian impetus to the transcendence of terms that can make virtue myopic, inflexible, and

antagonistic. The scene thus warns its audience that Father Merrin, for all his merit, moral authority, and traditionalism, cannot sustain attributions of goodness or heroism, since Merrin, in setting himself against the demon inside Regan MacNeil, resembles the demon in terms of strategy and orientation. He turns away from the self-sacrificing meekness of the Catholic vocation and conforms to the film's 'evil against evil' redefinition as a 'soldier of Christ', rather than a Christ-like man. The scene culminates in Merrin's face-off with a statue of the demon – the sunset on the horizon indicative of the destructiveness and interchangeability of these figures. Moreover, the film juxtaposes these images with the image of two dogs fighting, one that underscores the continual, near-animal senselessness of Merrin and the audience's moral sureness. William Friedkin, *The Exorcist's* director, thus states the importance of the Nineveh scene to the film:

The Iraq scene introduces to you what kind of man Father Merrin is, the man who is called in as an exorcist. It establishes, in a kind of abstract fashion, that Merrin gets a premonition that he is going to have to perform an exorcism. It also establishes the fact that he is not a very well man. That he is a very sick man. And this sick old man, who is given to believe in omens and symbols, is going to be asked to drive a demon out of a little girl.

(Derry 1977: 121)

Merrin's 'sickness' refers to a weakness of constitution, one that results in Merrin's death at the film's conclusion. It also refers to Merrin's interest in 'omens and symbols', to 'good versus evil' constructions of destiny that create a sort of moral, religious, and intellectual sickness that forces Merrin to uncritically confront a 12 year old girl: a move that eventually brings Merrin and the demon together, as the film later suggests.

In contrast, Father Damien Karras seems intermediate to Regan's demon and Father Merrin, more uncertain, and also more Christ-like in that Karras wavers from the human to the divine, from the 'evil' of confrontation to the transcendence of self-sacrifice. His instincts first move him to confrontation: Karras argues with his mother while trying to console her, she dies thereafter, and he then dreams of her descent into a Hell's Kitchen subway. Karras, also a boxer, later takes some frustration out on a heavy bag, an image that foreshadows the confrontation with the demon. In fact, when Karras first meets Regan MacNeil, the demon rearticulates the theodicy of the film first given in the Nineveh scene:

Demon: What an excellent day for an exorcism!

Father Karras: You'd like that?

Demon: Intensely.

Father Karras: But wouldn't that drive you out of Regan?

Demon: It would bring us together.

Father Karras: You and Regan?

Demon: You and us.

(*The Exorcist* 1973)

At the exorcism, Karras resolves to save Regan, even though he could not save his mother, and tells Chris MacNeil that her daughter will not die. He re-enters Regan's room and discovers Father Merrin's death, which came about after Merrin and Karras took on the demon with an incredible adversarial tenor to the rite: 'The power of Christ compels you' to leave us, they exhort the demon (*The Exorcist* 1973). Karras mounts the stairs in a movement suggestive of

transcendence and opposite to his cantankerous mother's descent into the subway. Meanwhile, Regan lurches over Merrin's corpse, meditative at first, then contemptuously giddy over Merrin's death – an uncomfortable moment in the film that suggests that Merrin and the demon come together in the afterlife. Karras, in frustration, attacks the demon and thus threatens injury or death to Regan in a consummation of the film's 'evil against evil' theodicy. Karras, though, freely invites the demon into himself; like Christ, Karras shoulders the enormity of others' sins, which the devil totalizes and represents. Also, like Christ, who chastises Peter for severing a soldier's ear at Christ's arrest in Gethsemane, Karras chooses self-sacrifice over confrontation. Hibbs sees divine intervention in this moment of the film:

Through our manifold weaknesses, we are vulnerable to assault from malevolent spiritual forces. If there is a way to overcome this danger, it points beyond morality narrowly construed to a narrative of redemption, not to what we achieve on our own, but to what can be done through a divine gift.

(Hibbs 1999: 63)

In any case, the 'gift' of *The Exorcist* is that the film moves us away from this 'morality' to a sense of Christ's 'grace', and the ultimate compensation for Adam and Eve's weakness; from two hours of watching Regan MacNeil's torture, debilitation, and embarrassment; and from the mistakenness of the audience's either/or moral sureties, especially as we see the consequences of these sureties in the film.

EPISTEMIC THEMATICS: 'IT'S, UH, PURELY, UH, FORCE OF SUGGESTION'

Mark Kermode argues that the Nineveh scene in *The Exorcist* contextualizes its later exorcism scenes, though he insists on using stale 'good versus evil' terminology for them. The film's 'evil against evil' theme translocates from Iraq, the site of Eden and Adam's loss of innocence, to Georgetown, Washington D.C., which reveals another set of tensions in the forces of spiritualism and secularism. Kermode thus argues that the Nineveh scene also establishes 'the forthcoming contest between science and religion, in which doctors and priests will battle to subdue an uncontrollable child whose sociopathic behaviour is threatening to destroy her already vulnerable family' (Kermode 2003: 25). Faith, in the film's terms, and science correlate with the Jesuit spiritualism and Capitol Hill secularism that inform the film's main location, and also, according to Frenz and Farrell, correlate with two ideological tendencies that create tremendous turbulence, conflict, and dissatisfaction in the American consciousness: 'transcendence,' another term for faith or spiritualism, can, when taken to extremes, induce ignorance, moral smugness, and arrogant notions of manifest destiny, whereas 'positivism,' another term for science, can inhibit social criticism, self-actualization, and the development of new ideas, resulting in feelings of alienation and helplessness. Frenz and Farrell see in *The Exorcist* a vindication of their definition of 'transcendence':

As a social event, *The Exorcist* marks a watershed moment of American social change. It at once crystallized America's disillusionment with Positivism and at the same time reaffirmed transcendent Christian faith

as the most viable means of coping with the problems of contemporary life [...]

In short, the reaffirmation of religious faith within *The Exorcist* may find its rhetorical correlate in communicative acts which create or assume transcendent ideals and principles as guides to public life.

(Frentz and Farrell 1975: 40, 47)

This criticism, though, uses 'transcendence' in a narrow transcendentalist sense, even while it conforms its terms to the film's 'evil against evil' theodicy: in that movement towards one extreme seems no more salvific, comprehensive, or worthwhile than movement towards the other. In fact, *The Exorcist* types faith and science as two terms in opposition, and invites the very *transcendence* of these terms and the limitations of their epistemologies.

Again, *The Exorcist* relies on Catholic catechism to re-term and clarify the limitations of faith and science. The *Catechism* discusses 'the virtue of religion', which carefully eschews superstition, the excess of religion and the extreme of faith, and also irreligion, the deficiency of religion and thus the extreme of science and direct experience. The *Catechism* argues that superstition deviates from 'the virtue of religion' in its magical and unlawful thinking, and that irreligion means 'tempting God, in words or deeds' out of an overemphasis on scepticism (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1995: 564–71). *The Exorcist* offers us 'the virtue of religion' – the moderation of faith and science – as a means of transcending the uneasy co-extensiveness of these terms in the American consciousness. Regan MacNeil thus undergoes a set of exorcism rites and medical examinations that point up the invasiveness, overconfidence, and deleterious effects of the rival epistemologies of faith and science. Moreover, Father Damien Karras serves to mediate the superstition of Father Merrin and the irreligion of Lieutenant Kinderman, the officer investigating Burke Dennings's murder. Karras thus hypostatizes, in a sense, these two contentious methodologies of experience.

We first see Chris MacNeil vacillating from one extreme to another in the course of the film, and we cannot ascertain whether she wholly arrives at 'the virtue of religion' in the Catholic sense of the term (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1995: 568). She treats the disturbances affecting Regan's mental health sceptically, in an almost positivistic manner, carrying a candle into an attic to investigate strange noises coming from that direction. She never considers supernatural explanations for these noises, attributing them to rats, even though she cannot detect any in the attic and even though she witnesses the candle's flame coruscate without reason. When Regan's condition worsens, Chris MacNeil turns to medical examiners and later psychotherapists to account for Regan's violent, erratic, and uncharacteristic outbursts, obscurities, truculence, and moroseness. Regan undergoes an arteriogram, an encephalogram, and a hypnosis session, all of which seem to Kermod like 'Inquisitional torture,' sadistically invasive in their execution (Kermod 2003: 52). The doctors' confidence in these diagnostic instruments and medical technologies overlies a faith in scientism much like faith in religion. These doctors remain uncertain as to the cause of Regan's distress much as Catholics, for example, must remain uncertain, at the level of direct and objective experience, of God or Satan's definite existence. These doctors, stuck at the extreme of irreligion, insist that Chris 'exhaust the somatic possibilities' concerning Regan's treatment, arguing that a 'disturbance in the chemico-electrical activity' of the temporal lobe will likely account for Regan's condition (*The Exorcist*

1973). Chris, dissatisfied with these diagnoses, shifts away from irreligion for a moment, even referencing Christ to express a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with the doctors' scientism: 'Oh what are you talking about for Chrissakes! Did you see her or not? She's acting like she's out of her fucking mind' (*The Exorcist* 1973). Chris overturns the saneness of the doctors' rationalistic interpretation of Regan's condition, and thus articulates Geary's later reading of early scenes like these in *The Exorcist*: 'The intrusions mount to an explosion of terror which overturns the original materialistic mindset, leaving a sense that what reality contains is larger and darker than the legacy of the Enlightenment would have us believe' (Geary 1993: 57). The doctors, at a loss for an explanation, then mention to Chris the therapeutic recourse of exorcism while discrediting the faith-healing efficaciousness of its rites:

Clinician: Have you ever heard of an exorcism? [...] Well, it's a stylized ritual in which the, uh, rabbi or the priest try to drive out the so-called invading spirit. It's pretty much discarded these days, except by the Catholics, who keep it in the closet as a sort of embarrassment, but, uh, it has worked, in fact, although not for the reasons they think, of course. It's, uh, purely, uh, force of suggestion. The victim's belief in possession is what helped cause it, so that in the same way, the belief in the power of exorcism can make it disappear.

Chris (incredulous): You're telling me that I should take my daughter to a witch doctor, is that it?

(*The Exorcist* 1973)

This exchange attaches witchery, faith healing, and magical thinking to these doctors and therapists recommending exorcism; more than deconstructing their scientism, this exchange makes 'realistic' the ritualism and 'transcendence' of those who conduct exorcisms. In spite of this convergence of two otherwise contentious epistemologies, Chris turns almost superstitious in trying to enlist the services of 'a witch doctor' for Regan's sake, surprising Father Karras about 'getting an exorcism'. He reacts with scepticism, trusting in 'all those things they taught [him] at Harvard', though when Chris cries in frustration, Karras, unlike the doctors, never wholly discounts supernaturalism's influence on us.

Chris MacNeil has confidence in Father Karras's abilities; in a sense, she has faith in the clearest Christ-figure in the film. Karras, much like Chris, moves from irreligion to superstition in the narrative, although more so towards self-sacrifice, which, in a way the doctors seem incapable of, involves the hypostatizing transcendence of these extremes. He develops a sense of the limitations of irreligion, facing the very scepticism with which he at first treats Chris MacNeil's entreaties for a Catholic intervention:

Karras: I'm only against the possibility of doing your daughter more harm than good [...] I need evidence that the church would accept as signs of possession, like her speaking in a language she's never known or studied [...] Look, your daughter doesn't say she's a demon. She says she's the devil himself. Now if you've seen as many psychotics as I have, you realize that's the same thing as saying you're Napoleon Bonaparte. You asked me what I think is best for your daughter. Six months, under observation, in the best hospital you can find.

Chris: I'm telling you that that thing upstairs isn't my daughter. Now I want you to tell me that you know for a fact that there's nothing wrong with my daughter except in her mind. You tell me that you know for a fact that an exorcism wouldn't do any good! You tell me that!

(*The Exorcist* 1973)

Karras returns Chris's movement towards credulousness, if not 'the virtue of religion', with a scepticism resembling her own, thus enacting the tensions of faith and science that couch the film's 'evil against evil' theme in epistemic terms. Earlier, though, Karras met the film's embodiment of the inadequacies of science and irreligion, Lieutenant Kinderman, who suspects, in an over-reliance on forensic clichés, that a 'very large man' took the life of Burke Dennings. Karras and Kinderman discuss the matter close to some tennis courts, which signify the volleying of Karras's connection with faith and Kinderman's common sense rationalism:

Kinderman: Burke Dennings, good Father, was found at the bottom of those steps leading to M Street with his head turned completely around, facing backwards.

Karras: It didn't happen in the fall?

Kinderman: It's possible. Possible, however ...

Karras: Unlikely.

Kinderman: Exactly. So on the one hand, we've got a witchcraft kind of murder, and on the other hand a Black Mass type desecration on the church. [...] If you knew [who committed these acts], you wouldn't tell huh?

Karras: No, I probably wouldn't.

Kinderman: Not to bother you with trivia, but a psychiatrist, in sunny California no less, was put in jail for not telling the police what he knew about a patient.

Karras: Is that a threat?

Kinderman: No, I mention it only in passing.

Karras: Incidentally, I mention it only in passing. I could always tell the judge it was a matter of confession.

(*The Exorcist* 1973)

Karras turns and leaves after this exchange, in which Kinderman confronts Karras with the limitations of scientific investigation, with its incessant cross-examining, and moreover with its chauvinism, which discounts other modes of experience and interpretations of events. Karras thus turns away from Kinderman in an epistemic sense – and also in a narrative one, since Kinderman remains on the margins of the action for the rest of the film.

Karras receives church sanction for the exorcism and must conduct it with Father Merrin, Kinderman's opposite given that Merrin epitomizes superstition and excessive faith. At first Karras offers Merrin some information on Regan's case:

Karras: I think it might be helpful if I gave you some background on the different personalities Regan has manifested. So far, I'd say there seem to be three. She's convinced ...

Merrin: There is only one.

(*The Exorcist* 1973)

Merrin's shortness with Karras ironically shows three inadequacies of an over-reliance on faith. First, unlike Kinderman, who uses so much dialogue as to accomplish nothing, Merrin silences dialogue altogether, commanding respect and deference from Karras while evidencing the arrogance and ignorance that Frenzt and Farrell associate with their notion of 'transcendence'. Next, Merrin's intransigence causes Regan undue suffering, since he takes a combative, self-righteous stance in the exorcism; this results in the demon scarring Regan's calves and inducing her to vomit in retaliation. Finally, Merrin assumes the same staunchness – a tenacious form of faith that resembles superstition – with which Karras left Kinderman, thus confronting Karras with the excesses of faith in a narrative reversal of Karras earlier confronting Chris MacNeil with the excesses of reason. Karras must renounce the extremes that Merrin and Kinderman represent. These three men mirror the three entities troubling Regan MacNeil, since none of them can cope methodologically with her distress: the superstition of the exorcism and the irreligion of the medical and criminal investigations rather serve to aggravate it. Only Father Karras, in a final, desperate act of self-sacrifice – of somatic and spiritual simpatico with the demon – comes to reconcile and transcend these extremes, thus restoring Regan to her former state of being.

(GEO)POLITICAL THEMATICS: 'YOU'RE BETRAYING YOUR OWN PRINCIPLES!'

Through its epistemic re-creation of other images in western literature, *The Exorcist* cautions us away from other forms of superstition: specifically, it cautions us away from using texts like it to anticipate future textual, cultural, or trans/national developments. In one of the film's most salient moments, Regan MacNeil's face rotates 180 degrees. Kermode describes this moment as a 'crowd-pleasing piece of nonsense' (Kermode 2003: 65), and thus misses the film's allusion to the circle of the fortune-tellers in Dante's *Inferno*. These sinners must suffer an ironic torment for wishing to see too far ahead of them:

[I saw] that each of them was hideously distorted
 between the top of the chest and the lines of the jaw;
 for the face was reversed on the neck, and they came on
 backwards, staring backwards at their loins,
 for to look before them was forbidden.

(Alighieri 2001: 174–5)

Earlier in the film, Regan MacNeil uses an Ouija medium to contact 'Captain Howdy,' a code name for the demon that later possesses her. Her experimentation constitutes fortune telling, in that Ouijas allow us a look into the 'forbidden' unknown, and thus Regan's face-swivelling alludes to the judgment of the fortune-tellers in *The Inferno*. More than a curious allusion, this scene also warns us of the consequences of superstition. As a parable, though, *The Exorcist* must also teach us to search out codifications of the future in the film's literary and historical contexts – always remaining careful of the tendency of irreligious science to objectify men and women and shunt them into deterministic worldviews. This 180-degree set piece strategically and intra-textually figures *The Exorcist* as a Janus-work, always synchronic and somehow relevant at the time of its reception: always a form of what we may term the *ahistorical fantastic*.

The Exorcist thus collapses another set of dichotomous terms involving competitive socio-political interests, trans/national identities, and references to 'core values' that deadlock attempts at diplomatic negotiation. Interpretation that focuses on these inimical terms can fragment understanding of the film and moreover frustrate the transcendence of terms that foment conflict, dissonance, and unwillingness to listen or compromise. Peter Hutchings, for example, states that *The Exorcist* re-images the tensions of conservatism and progressivism for audiences of the 1970s. The film's association with Regan's vulgarity and rebelliousness, with divorce and single-mother families, comes from uneasiness over 1960s atheism, feminism and sexual revolution, and religious experimentation. In the film, Chris MacNeil disclaims religion; and Regan, almost a teenager, asserts her sexuality and uses an Ouija in spite of religious interdiction, which necessitates the reestablishment of conservative male authorities. Kinder and Houston thus argue that *The Exorcist* teaches us to fear 'all irreverence, unconventionality, rebellion, and complex sensuality' (Kinder and Houston 1987: 52). However, we can also see Regan as the victim of state and church authorities that repress women's sexual awareness and maturation. These authorities fear, make ugly, and distort the meaning of irreverence, teenage rebellion, and female sensuality. Unfortunately, either of these interpretations fall into the film's 'evil against evil' formulation, meaning that they set up contention over the rightness of certain arguments, value systems, and political intentionality, which, in turn, can result in a climate of unfriendliness, demagoguery, and cultural division.

We see the destructiveness of dichotomous values and identities on the set of actress Chris MacNeil's film *Crash Course*, a title suggestive of the internecine relationship of these conflicting identities. The title also implies Regan's narrative 'crash course' with the demon, which allegorizes the effects of combative ideologies on children living in a culture torn by them. In the film within a film, Chris shouts through a megaphone at a near-riot of student agitators, whose actions, Chris tells them, seem fractious and irresponsible – 'You're betraying your own principles,' she screams at them. After this scene, the film cuts to a shot of Chris and director Burke Dennings laughing and embracing, with Father Karras watching them at the margins of the shoot and smiling with them. These two scenes constitute a meta-fictive moment in *The Exorcist*, with the message that interpretations like the ones Hutchings mentions coincide with the film's 'evil against evil' theme: conservative and anti-establishmentarian forces collide with violent and counterproductive results. The embrace, though, implies the transcendence of these identities and the 'evil against evil' theme that subsumes them – the figure of Karras even signifies 'divine' sanction for this transcendence, the sidelines offering him little chance at grandstanding in a way nicely congruous to the film's climactic self-sacrifice.

Unfortunately, Burke Dennings, after the embrace and the moral instruction it signifies, carries divisiveness into Chris MacNeil's home, coincidentally on the night when Regan first starts to manifest symptoms of disturbance. At a dinner party, the Jewish Dennings confronts, while drunk, Chris's German servant Karl, accusing him of having Nazi sympathies, even though the film never corroborates Dennings's suspicions. This scene re-enacts the campus standoff in *Crash Course*: in it, we see conservative forces (Karl's stuffiness) in stubborn, chest-beating conflict with the forces of progressivism, which the freer, artistic Dennings embodies. Moreover, this confrontation (with its historical and geopolitical baggage) invades the family unit; Regan then exaggerates this unreasonableness in murdering Dennings and threatening the staff

enough to leave a crucifix in Regan's room in an effort to sidestep the destructive consequences of a mutual antagonism that conforms to the film's 'evil against evil' theme. In any case, we see the narrative marginalization of these characters after their confrontation – another consequence of irreconcilable terms that mirror the internal conflicts of Israel and Germany in the twentieth century, resulting from separatist ethnic, political, and national thinking. Regan, in the film's synchronic rhetoricizing of her struggle with the demon, internalizes similar conflicts for Americans; whether the social unrest of the film's 1970s context or the confusion over the Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks, and the 'war against terror' around the time of the film's reissue.

The Exorcist traces out some of these wide-scale religio-political contestations in its narrative—ones trans/national in relation to values, state and church identities, and theatres of operation—making the film almost trans/historical in its moral vision. *The Exorcist* moves from Nineveh to Georgetown – Iraq to Washington D.C. – anticipating the international tensions that these sites came to represent. Nineveh, wellspring of Mesopotamian religion and capital of the Assyrians (enemies of the Jews in the Books of Jonah and Nahum), opposes Georgetown, an early Jesuit centre for 'securing the future of American Catholicism through education' (Georgetown's Catholic and Jesuit Identity 2008: para. 1). The film thus opposes Muslims to Christians, 'infidels' to one another in the most orthodox sense of these religions. It also opposes the 'cradle of civilization' to the 'new world' and thus the religious conservatism of the Middle East to the religious openness and moral flexibility of the United States, at least since the 1960s. Most importantly, the settings of the film oppose Iraq, and the former capital of Assyria, to the United States and its current capital Washington D.C. In this sense, the film commingles the religious, historical, and geopolitical to arrive at an 'evil against evil' characterization of America's tense relations with Iraq and other nation-states in the Middle East, in which these states refer to one another as 'evil' or 'satanic' to obviate negotiation, sanctify violence, inflame their citizens against other cultures, and rationalize dubious military, political, and socio-economic strategies. We see this type of rhetoric, for example, in former Iranian Chief-of-State Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 12 September, 1980, 'Message to the Pilgrims':

America is the number-one enemy of the deprived and oppressed people of the world. [...] Iran has tried to sever all its relations with this Great Satan and it is for this reason that it now finds wars imposed on it. America has urged Iraq to spill the blood of our young men [...] Let Muslim nations be aware that Iran is a country effectively at war with America, and that our martyrs – the brave young men of our army and the Revolutionary Guards – are defending Iran and the Islam we hold dear against America.

(Khomeini 1981: 305)

Khomeini came up with the term 'Great Satan' to denounce America for its interference with Muslim countries, establishing a 'good versus evil' relationship that, as we see in *The Exorcist* and Khomeini's language, results in loss of lives and mutual destruction. The connotations of 'Great Satan' remain common in the Middle East, with former Iraqi Chief-of-State Saddam Hussein, once Khomeini's enemy, using the term 'evil' to describe America in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Hussein first warned Americans that Iraqis 'are capable of fighting to the victorious end which God wants' and that 'the blood of our

martyrs will burn you'; after the war, he declared that 'Iraq is the one that is victorious. Iraq has succeeded in demolishing the aura of the United States, the empire of evil, terror, and aggression' (Karsh and Rautsi 1991: 222, 266). Like Khomeini, Hussein morally vindicates decisions involving the destruction of lives, as Iraqi casualties translate into 'martyrs', much as with Iranian Muslims. Hussein's language, especially the use of epithets like 'evil' and 'aggression', resembles the rhetoric of President George H. W. Bush, who sought to condemn 'the brutal aggression of Saddam Hussein', describing the war with Iraq as 'a clear case of good versus evil', with America 'selflessly confronting evil for the sake of good in a land so far away' (Campbell 1993: 21–2). His son, President George W. Bush, went on to term Iran and Iraq an 'axis of evil' in the 29 January 2002, State of the Union Address, inflaming American sentiment against these nations: 'We've come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and must be opposed' by the 'greater good' that America represents (Bush 2002: para. 63). After capturing Hussein in late 2003, Bush went on to associate the 'thugs' of the Iraq insurgencies with Hussein's 'evil regime' in the 20 January 2004 State of the Union Address. The Bushes' and Hussein's use of 'evil' and its cognate terms to describe each other's governments, in line with *The Exorcist's* 'evil against evil' theme, results in continuous war, destruction, the freezing of negotiation, and the underscoring of differences in culture, religion, and social values.

Of course, the 1973 *The Exorcist* cannot forecast the current situation in America and the Middle East, nor the fallout of the September 11, 2001 attacks. We cannot treat the film superstitiously, of course. However, *The Exorcist* also warns us that we cannot see these events as inevitable, that we must look to art and religion for a fuller engagement with history, so that we can then exercise smarter decision-making towards the transcendence of 'crash course' identities, morally reductive discourse, and deterministic modes of study that threaten alienation and disempowerment. Father Merrin and Lieutenant Kinderman, in spite of their moral and juridical authoritativeness, work against Regan MacNeil's welfare; and their self-justifying unwillingness to consider other viewpoints anticipates Bush and Hussein's criticism of each other, which the charges of 'evil', 'terror,' and 'aggression' cover over and rationalize. Father Karras, unlike these men, though caught in the middle of them, realizes *The Exorcist's* intentions as a parable – the film does not mean to tell our fortunes or survey international relations, but to offer its viewers a realistic, illustrative, and memorable means of using sacrifice, compromise, sympathizing, and active negotiation to overcome our moral and political shortsightedness, without overreaching the current moment for the nebulous future. In this way, the film emerges as transhistorical; it collapses dichotomies that might culminate in further destruction and calls for a transcendence of those identities, state or otherwise, that call on God's name in the interest of murder. Thus, in its own way, *The Exorcist* seeks our liberation.

CONCLUSION

Our discussion of 'transcendence' does not mean to lessen or neutralize the terror *The Exorcist* evokes. *Entertainment Weekly* ranks the film as the number one 'scariest movie of all time' for a reason (Ascher-Walsh 1999: 25). We must not assume, though, like some critics, that this reason indicates the moral sickness of *The Exorcist's* viewers. William K. Everson wonders whether it 'is perhaps a symptom of our unhealthy times that audiences flocked to *The Exorcist*, wanting

to be scared, *intending* to scream, coming away haunted and sickened by it, yet somehow proud of having forced themselves to endure it' (Everson 1974: 247, original emphasis). Everson treats the film's audiences like Merrin and the doctors treat Regan – as unhealthy, even contemptible. A more optimistic reading, though, one in tune with *The Exorcist's* cautionary dialogue, argues that these audiences, more like Karras, sacrifice themselves to a film experience that, no matter how excruciating, allows them to transform their sensibilities and walk away from the theatre unsatisfied with fighting and wanting to embrace others – an act more complex than it looks, since it resembles Father Merrin's stare-down with the statue of the demon in the opening moments of the film, and reconciles this image with Father Dyer's Janus-like about-face after contemplating the stairs that Karras fell down in the film's conclusion. This *convergence of profiles*, much like the superimposition of the demon over Regan's features, invites us to sacrifice the cheek-turning/head-swivelling anxieties which ideological terror taut-ontologically contrives out of the sense-activity of our own relative embodiments.

REFERENCES

- Alighieri, Dante (2001), *The Inferno* (trans. John Ciardi), New York: Signet.
- Ascher-Walsh, Rebecca, et al. (1999), '25 Scariest Movies of All Time', *Entertainment Weekly*, 23 July, pp. 25–30.
- Bush, George W. (2002), 'State of the Union', *Presidential Speeches*. 29 January, <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/01.29.02.html>. Accessed 11 November 2009.
- Bush, George W. (2004), 'State of the Union Address', *Presidential Speeches*. 20 January, <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/01.20.04.html>. Accessed 11 November 2009.
- Campbell, David (1993), *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics, and the Narratives of the Gulf War*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995), New York: Image.
- Derry, Charles (1977), *Dark Dreams: The Horror Film from Psycho to Jaws*, New York: A. S. Barnes.
- Everson, William K. (1974), *Classics of the Horror Film: From the Days of the Silent Film to The Exorcist*, Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel.
- Frentz, Thomas S., and Farrell, Thomas B. (1975), 'Conversion of America's Consciousness: The Rhetoric of *The Exorcist*', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61 (1), pp. 40–47.
- Friedkin, William (1974), *The Exorcist*, perf. Ellen Burstyn, Max von Sydow, and Linda Blair, Burbank: Warner Studios.
- Geary, Robert F. (1993), 'The Exorcist: Deep Horror?' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 5 (4), pp. 55–63.
- Georgetown's Catholic and Jesuit Identity (2008), *About Georgetown*, Georgetown University: Washington D.C., 15 February, <http://explore.georgetown.edu/documents/?DocumentID=736>. Accessed 11 November 2009.
- Hibbs, Thomas S. (1999), *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld*, Dallas: Spence.
- Hutchings, Peter (2004), *The Horror Film*, Harlow, England: Pearson.
- Jancovich, Mark (1992), *Horror*, London: B. T. Batsford.
- Karsh, Efraim, and Rautsi, Inari (1991), *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography*, New York: Grove Press.

- Kelly, Allison M. (2004), 'A Girl's Best Friend Is Her Mother: *The Exorcist* as a Post-Modern Oedipal Tale', *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 25 (6), pp. 64–69.
- Kermode, Mark (2003), *The Exorcist*, second edition, London: BFI.
- Khomeini, Ruhollah (1981), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (trans. Hamid Algar), Berkeley: Mizan Press.
- Kinder, Marsha, and Houston, Beverle (1987), 'Seeing Is Believing: *The Exorcist* and *Don't Look Now*', in Gregory A. Waller (ed.), *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Murfin, Ross, and Ray, Supryia M. (1997), *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Boston: Bedford.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Dudenhoeffer, L. (2010), "Evil against Evil": The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*', *Horror Studies* 1: 1, pp. 73–88, doi: [10.1386/host.1.1.73/1](https://doi.org/10.1386/host.1.1.73/1)

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Larrie Dudenhoeffer is an Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University and a doctoral candidate in critical theory, film studies, and classical rhetorics at Georgia State University. He is the author of 'Monster Mishmash: Iconicity and Intertextuality in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*' in Volume 19 of the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* and 'Hitch-cockeyed: Ocular Dysfunction Ocular Dys/function in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*' in the forthcoming issue of *Cinephile*.

E-mail: ldudenho@kennesaw.edu
