

‘God Never Talks:’ Alternative Interpretations of the Rhetoric Used in William Friedkin and

William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist*

by

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ABSTRACT

Competing explanations have been brought forward regarding the rhetorical implications of the 1973 horror film, *The Exorcist*. This paper aims to argue against those which insist that the film is meant to be viewed as endorsing a solely theistic interpretation. An opposing argument as such alienates and disregards a number of credible explanations and integral pieces of evidence, from both outside sources and the film itself. Therefore, this paper will utilize several of such sources, which include, but are not limited to film analyses and reviews, rhetorical analyses, and comparative writings with other works in the field. Ultimately, this paper will compare its own explanations and arguments with opposing ones, with the goal of illustrating that *The Exorcist*'s rhetoric is far more ambiguous and secular than many interpret it to be.

Keywords: digital media production, communication, rhetorical analysis, audiovisual rhetoric, film and media studies, 20th century cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting in a dimly lit bar and surrounded by a sea of nameless faces, Father Damien Karras (portrayed by the late Jason Miller) expounds his inner conflicts to a senior clergyman.

Responding to the latter’s praise of his service, Karras comments that “it’s more than psychiatry, and you know that, Tom. Some of their problems come down to faith, their vocation and meaning of their lives, and I can’t cut it anymore. I need out. I’m unfit... I think I’ve lost my faith, Tom” (*The Exorcist*). This early introduction to Father Karras’s character not only establishes the route of his own arc, but additionally, it provides context for much of the rhetorical debate that surrounds its respective film.

Released just one day after Christmas in the United States in 1973, *The Exorcist*, directed by veteran filmmaker, William Friedkin, is widely considered to be one of the most important and influential horror films to have ever been produced (Crofts 375). Furthermore, the film also retains its status as a highly controversial film, however, the standards of such an assertion have certainly changed over the course of the past half-century. Before delving into the finer details concerning the staffing and casting of *The Exorcist*, it is first necessary to establish the cultural significance of the work. To perform such a task, it is imperative that one considers the views and conclusions of experts in the field of film analysis both at the time of release, and through the contemporary lens. Longtime contributor to the communication field, Dr. Janice Schuetz commented in 1975 that “[the impact of the film’s visceral rhetoric] extends beyond immediate spectators, provoking theoretically significant arguments in theological, psychological, and social circles. Hence, it emerges as one of the most popular and controversial films in recent years” (92). This impact, coming as a direct result of the unabashed direction that *The Exorcist*’s

subject matter takes, is undoubtedly a contributing factor towards its longevity, both in terms of critical and casual exposure.

Moreover, one needs only to consider the vast number of supernatural horror films that were released in the mid to late 1970's, when arguing in regard to *The Exorcist's* immediate influence. A professor of film and English, Dr. Ian Olney explains that "when *The Exorcist* became the first modern horror blockbuster upon its release in 1973, it spawned a legion of imitators both in the United States and abroad... directors churned out possession films at a frantic pace [in Continental Europe] from the mid-1970s through the end of the decade" (561). Although there are those works that continue to stand the test of time, *The Exorcist* is arguably one of the most memorable films of not only its generation, but of the 20th century. Noted film critic and journalist, Jason Zinoman, writing in his book, *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood, and Invented Modern Horror*, explains how William Friedkin, John Carpenter, Wes Craven, Sean S. Cunningham, and several other 1970's to 1980's era horror directors definitively revolutionized the filmmaking and storytelling techniques of their respective genre (91-92). These claims are corroborated by the many academic and professional analyses, discussions, reviews, and other writings of the film that have been composed from the time of *The Exorcist's* release to present day.

Keeping this necessary cultural context in mind, when one goes about examining and analyzing the rhetoric of a work of art, the internal visions of the lead creatives behind the project should be, at the bare minimum, considered. In the case of *The Exorcist*, there are two individuals whose roles fit within these parameters: William Friedkin, who served as the film's director, and William Peter Blatty, who served as the film's writer and producer. Additionally,

Blatty also wrote the 1971 novel of the same name which *The Exorcist* is adapted from. Aside from *The Exorcist*, Friedkin is perhaps best known for directing the 1971 thriller, *The French Connection*. Nevertheless, as many have noted, the conflicting creative visions between the two men served as a defining element in regard to the film's rhetorical direction.

Writing in 1978, Dr. Martin J. Medhurst, now a nationally recognized professor of rhetoric, comments that the film "has been attacked for its religiosity—and its lack of it; denounced for its profanity—and defended for the same; branded as pornographic, yet given tacit approval by churchmen... Though this polarity in and of itself is not unusual, the peculiarity [*sic*] arises from the fact that critics often cite the same 'evidence' as support for widely divergent evaluations" (75). The source of these competing claims comes as a result of the conflicting rhetorical intentions of Friedkin and Blatty. Unlike the creators of the source material for many other Hollywood productions, Blatty's insight was given a considerable amount of weight both prior to and during the production of the film. Writing in his autobiography, Friedkin explains that after reading Blatty's novel for the first time, he called the author and shouted, "Bill, my God, this is wonderful! What the hell is this" (204)? The two men maintained a close friendship all the way from the pre-production of *The Exorcist* up until Blatty's passing in 2017 (Schudel 5). Nevertheless, whereas Friedkin is often associated with the Hollywood Renaissance, a movement which aimed to push the boundaries of conventional storytelling in film, Blatty came from a highly conservative background, and his writing of *The Exorcist* novel was informed by a definitively theistic perspective (Friedkin 215).

Moreover, returning to the previous quote by Father Karras, a central figure of the film, his character struggle is emblematic of the conflicting identities of *The Exorcist*. Friedkin sought

to deliver an ambiguous, albeit not completely atheistic interpretation of the subject matter, whereas Blatty sought to do the opposite: framing the narrative in such a way that one is led to believe in the religious elements that are presented to them. Friedkin's direction leaves room for further interpretations extending beyond Blatty's original work; these interpretations include the themes of medical intervention, patriarchy and social hierarchy, and the loss of past ideals, among many others. Nevertheless, this paper would be nothing if not redundant if it were to focus exclusively on the differences between the 1971 novel and 1973 film versions of *The Exorcist*. Therefore, this paper will note the discrepancies when necessary, but will otherwise focus on a purely cinema-oriented point of view. Despite the argument that the rhetoric used in 1973's *The Exorcist* definitively adheres to a theistic interpretation, when examined more closely, the film is revealed to simultaneously support and contradict this interpretation through its use of secular theming and subtext.

FROM NINEVEH TO D.C.

Centered around the supposed possession of twelve-year-old Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) by an ancient demon (voiced by the late Mercedes McCambridge), *The Exorcist* follows the efforts of Regan's mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), Father Karras, and veteran exorcist, Father Lankester Merrin (the late Max von Sydow), as they attempt to save the young girl's life. Along the way, the stories of Lieutenant William F. Kinderman (the late Lee J. Cobb), Sharon Spencer (Kitty Winn), and Burke Dennings (the late Jack MacGowran in his final role) are introduced, among others (*The Exorcist*). All the aforementioned, excluding Father Merrin, are introduced in or around Georgetown, Washington, D.C. It is essential to note that Blatty, himself, attended Georgetown University, one of the central settings of the film (Blatty 6). This detail is important

to note, as it demonstrates the personal connection between Blatty's religiosity and the original *Exorcist* novel and screenplay of the film. Nevertheless, despite the historical, rhetorical, and theological importance of Georgetown and the capital region, the theatrical release of 1973's *The Exorcist*, as well as the 1971 novel, begin in Hatra, Iraq.

There are those within the field of film and media analysis who argue that the theistic implications of *The Exorcist* are not up for debate. This sentiment is most often applied to the final act of the film, but the Iraq sequence is also a consistent target of detailed analyses. To begin, those who argue from this position often highlight the artifact that Merrin uncovers within the first few minutes of the film. While at an archeological dig in the Nineveh region of Iraq, Merrin discovers a small, crumbling statue of a wind demon, who is officially named Pazuzu in the 1971 novel and 1977 sequel film, *Exorcist II: The Heretic (The Exorcist)*. Larrie Dudenhoefter, longtime film writer and educator, argues that "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" (73). Dudenhoefter's personal identification of *The Exorcist's* supposedly definitive theodicy is a common sentiment among his peers in the field.

Taking Father Merrin's initial reaction to the statue of Pazuzu at face value, Dudenhoefter, among others, insists that the narrative framing of the film comes down to a subversion of the good versus evil archetype. In terms of religious theodicy, this narrative composition is among the most often utilized within both cinema and media as a whole.

Nevertheless, those who defend Dudenhoeffer's views utilize the climax of the film as evidence of their argument. Allowing the demon to ultimately possess himself, Father Karras throws himself from Regan's bedroom window - killing both himself and Pazuzu (until the sequel). Although suicide is shunned, and even considered a sin by certain branches of Christianity, Karras's sacrifice is nevertheless seen as a Christ-like moment of heroism. The theological justification in this moment relies upon the greater context of the film, as the demon has already killed Father Merrin and Burke Dennings by this point (Dudenhoeffer 77). In this regard, the prologue to *The Exorcist* may be interpreted as foreshadowing the ultimate theological battle between the faithful and the faithless later in the film.

Despite the arguments made by Dudenhoeffer and others, *The Exorcist's* Iraq sequence may be indicative of the theistic ambiguity of the film. Likewise, a more contemporary interpretation of the film's prologue views the sequence as representing a modern continuation of the demonic threat that Father Merrin encounters in Hatra. This argument exists in opposition to a literal interpretation of the events, such as the one presented by Dudenhoeffer. Film analyst, Rob Ager, noted for his distinct focus on visual rhetoric, is careful to note the repetitive imagery found throughout the film. He acknowledges the chimera-like nature of the standing statue of Pazuzu that Merrin encounters in Iraq, and how its amorphous form bears striking similarities to the arts and crafts creatures that Regan later shows to Chris in the first act ("Excavating *the Exorcist*"). Moreover, Merrin's discovery of the small Pazuzu statue in the prologue mirrors Lt. Kinderman's discovery of the two-legged dinosaur figure at the base of the steps outside of Regan's window ("Excavating *the Exorcist*"). In fact, these are the same steps where Karras dies

at the end of the film. These details are just a few out of many which support several possible symbolic interpretations.

The prior contemporary view of the Iraq sequence is aided by Ager's findings, as they indicate a clear parallel between the old world of Merrin in Nineveh and the new world of Regan in Washington. Whereas some scholars may argue that these details indicate that Pazuzu has merely physically journeyed from Iraq to the United States, in actuality, these pieces of imagery call the subject matter of the film into ambiguity. By intentionally showing the audience these repetitive instances of foiled symbolism, the film is implying that the antagonist is not meant to be solely interpreted as a literal ancient demon, but rather, as a representation of evil as a timeless concept. This view is one that only grows stronger over the course of *The Exorcist's* runtime, as throughout the film, we see various instances of modern civilization clashing with the constructs of religious antiquity. The Iraq prologue is just one sequence out of many which supports this concept.

ORIGINALITY AND SOURCE MATERIAL

As established, many of the arguments regarding *The Exorcist's* rhetorical implications cite the differences between the viewpoints of Friedkin and Blatty. Likewise, one needs only to note the original "real life" exorcism that served as Blatty's inspiration for the 1971 novel. Doing so will reveal Blatty's long-standing theistic view of his work's source material, which, in turn, influenced his own creative input throughout the filming of *The Exorcist*. Once again, this point of view, although not in complete contradiction, does stand in opposition to Friedkin's own direction of the film. Before exploring these competing views, it is important to first describe the rather realistic sequence of events which occur throughout the first act of the film.

After transitioning from the rising Sun of Iraq to the bustling streets of Georgetown, the audience is introduced to the actress, Chris MacNeil, and her young daughter, Regan. Chris is acting in a film about social activism, and is being directed by her friend, Burke Dennings. Watching from the crowd, Father Karras is clearly a fan of Chris, and views the production of the film until he heads off to Georgetown University for work. Later, the audience is introduced to Sharon and Karl (the late Rudolf Schündler), who are two houseworkers for the MacNeil family. Regan's upcoming birthday and the tensions surrounding Chris's recent divorce from her husband, Howard, serve as the initial plot threads to move the story forward. Against this main story line, Father Karras privately shares his declining sense of faith with his close friend, Father Joseph Dyer (portrayed by William O'Malley) and Tom, the fictional President of Georgetown University (portrayed by the late Thomas Bermingham). In their off-screen careers, both O'Malley and Bermingham were ordained ministers who served as religious advisors to the film (*The Exorcist*). Quickly following the initial character introductions, Regan begins to develop a number of strange afflictions: sudden changes in her mannerisms, violent mood swings, and inexplicable urination, among others. Furthermore, aggressive, poltergeist-like events occur at the MacNeil household with Regan at the epicenter.

There are those within the field of film analysis who argue that Regan's strange behaviors and medical conditions are meant to exemplify the gradual spread of her possession by the demon. Schuetz explains that Regan "is portrayed as a virtuous, loving twelve-year-old at the beginning and end of the film. But during the major portion of the movie, the virtue of the girl is strikingly transformed by the invasion of a hideous demon... While the girl's childlike innocence is hidden by her diabolical behavior, the audience realizes the concurrent existence of both" (95).

This interpretation of Regan's abnormalities is not to be unexpected, as it is the most common view of *The Exorcist's* central conflict. Furthermore, later in the film, towards the end of the first act and the start of the second, Chris permits Regan to be subjected to a series of intensive medical procedures. This is done to determine the origins of Regan's affliction, as up to this point in the film, no firm diagnosis has been passed along to Chris (*The Exorcist*). Nevertheless, these procedures heed few meaningful results, and Chris is left exasperated and terrified over her daughter's fate. Ultimately, this despair is what leads the otherwise faithless Chris into seeking out an exorcism for her child. Before delving into this foray regarding Karras and Merrin's roles in the film, it is integral to first deny that the aforementioned view of Regan's condition is definitive.

Although the first and early second acts of the film do well to show Regan in a rapidly deteriorating state, such a condition may not solely be the result of a demonic possession. Dr. Mark Kermode, internationally recognized writer and chief film critic of *The Observer*, notes that in the 1949 exorcism of Roland Doe, Blatty's "real life" inspiration for *The Exorcist*, the family of the apparent victim immediately turned towards faith for guidance. Ultimately, little medical or scientific intervention occurred throughout the original case (13). This detail is important to note, as Blatty modeled his novel after this case, and seemingly added in the various medical procedures Regan undergoes merely to build up the necessity for an actual exorcism. Nevertheless, in opposition to this, Friedkin was careful to pay close attention to the accuracy and legitimacy of the medical sequences early in the film.

In his autobiography, Friedkin notes that he "consulted with prominent doctors—Norman Chase, professor of radiology at NYU Medical Center, as well as two prominent physicians, Drs.

Herbert Walker and Arthur Snyder, so that the details of internal medicine and psychiatry would be accurate... These doctors had all witnessed similar behavior, and it seemed to resemble hallucinations derived from paranoid schizophrenia" (244-245). Furthermore, Friedkin's insistence on certain sequences being present in the film was often at odds with Blatty's vision. Kermode, commenting in an interview with *On Being*, says that "Bill [Blatty] had some sort of conflicts about how the film was received, what the film meant to people. He was very concerned that, because certain key sequences had been taken out of it, that the message of it wasn't clear" (Percy 30). It is worth repeating that this dichotomy is at the heart of what drives the rhetorical contradictions in the 1973 film. Although Blatty may have written the first act's sequence of events from a purely theistic viewpoint, under Friedkin's direction, the nature of *The Exorcist's* story transformed into something far more ambiguous.

DEATH AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Throughout *The Exorcist*, the filmmakers are careful to demonstrate the destructive power of the demon to the audience. Some of the most disturbing scenes and sequences in the film occur during the final act. This portion of the film concerns the actual exorcism itself at the hands of Fathers Merrin and Karras. Nevertheless, the early second act of the film also contains imagery, symbolism, and subtext that is meant to disturb the viewer and leave them in awe of Regan's grotesque new form. Perhaps one of the most focal turning points in the film occurs after Burke Dennings is implied to have been killed by Regan (*The Exorcist*). This moment propels the film into its final resolution trajectory and reveals a number of rhetorical elements hidden beneath the plot itself.

Those who defend the predominantly theistic interpretation of *The Exorcist* argue that Dennings' death at the hands of Regan is solely meant to demonstrate the extent to which her possession has reached. Dudenhoeffer, initially referring to the first scene in which the two characters appear, notes that "the film cuts to a shot of Chris and director Burke Dennings laughing and embracing... 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" (84). Although shown to be an energetic and enigmatic artist at first, Dennings' character later descends into moral ambiguity, as he accuses houseworker, Karl, of secretly being a Nazi. Furthermore, Dennings, at the same house party where this accusation occurs, becomes vehemently drunk, and considers delivering an intoxicated confession to Chris before stumbling out of her house (*The Exorcist*). Much has been said on the topic of Burke Dennings, especially when considering the coincidence of Regan's strange behavior during the party. This scene comes prior to Dennings' death and the following investigation into it by Lt. Kinderman (*The Exorcist*). Many analysts, such as Dudenhoeffer and Medhurst, note how Dennings' death and its investigation tie into the themes of human knowledge and limitation.

Medhurst writes that "Lt. Kinderman fails to turn up a clue in the desecration of the church or Burke Dennings' death. Time and again the viewer is reminded of the limitations of human knowledge and experience. Not only is human wisdom shown to be unequal to the task, but it is even pictured as being, itself, a form of evil" (87). Similar to Dudenhoeffer's "evil against evil" explanation, Medhurst frames the internal conflict of *The Exorcist* as an affair of man vs. intangible evil. The failure of humanity to prevent the death of Dennings (and later the

deaths of Merrin and Karras) is an abstract evil in this context. Likewise, Pazuzu, itself, is an intangible evil; as Ager notes, in Assyrian mythology, Pazuzu is the king of the wind demons ("Excavating *the Exorcist*"). Just like the wind, the demon's presence is felt, but is not tangible beyond the mortal shell that it inhabits; in the case of the first *Exorcist* film and novel, this shell is Regan. Many concurrent explanations have been raised regarding how the rhetoric and context of Dennings' death ties into the major themes of the film, however, few argue in favor of a secular attribute being given to the sequence's subtext.

Contrary to the writings of the above-mentioned authors, a less noted view has arisen in recent years regarding the symbolic importance of Dennings' death. Furthermore, there are those educators and analysts who have argued in favor of a potentially darker subtext regarding the events surrounding this plot point. The theme of social hierarchy is abundantly present throughout *The Exorcist*. Regan is handed off from doctor to doctor throughout the first and second acts, the majority of whom are men. Moreover, all three of the individuals who Regan murders are men, albeit she is "possessed" during those moments. Finally, all three of the film's unseen characters are also men: Regan's father, Howard MacNeil, Regan's imaginary friend, Captain Howdy, and Pazuzu, itself, whose serpentine penis may indicate its sex (*The Exorcist*). This sea of men, along with Fathers Karras and Merrin, square off against one another as Regan's life and Chris's sanity hang in the balance. It is important to note that, as of the writing of this paper, only men are permitted to enter Catholic priesthood or deaconhood; this practice follows the historic precedent (Chappell 8). As is the case with the vast majority of film and media as a whole, the male characters dominate *The Exorcist*'s plot progression. Notably, an exception to this rule is Chris's insistence that an exorcism occur. However, the decision to go

forward with this act is made by Tom and other church officials (*The Exorcist*). Nevertheless, these details are irrelevant without a greater point to be made regarding the subtext of Dennings’ death at the hands of Regan.

Gothic production analyst, Sara Williams, explains that “Regan seduces men who desire to cure her into her room, then dispatches them if they prove a threat to the absent father she desires. This is evidenced most acutely through the murder of Chris’s friend and director Dennings, whom Regan identifies as possible heir to her father’s position crucially before she is in the throes of her apparent possession” (228). Just as Dudenhoeffer was careful to acknowledge that Dennings’ role in the film predates the offset of Regan’s turbulent condition, Williams uses this as evidence of a more secular interpretation of the character’s death. As opposed to merely viewing the gruesome death of Dennings as a show of force by the demon, this alternative explanation argues that this sequence comes as a result of Regan’s internal conflict surrounding the disappearance of her father. Furthermore, not only has the primary male figure in her life vanished as a result of divorce, but Regan is subsequently passed between domineering male figures as the result of a condition that is no fault of her own. Considering these details, it is not without merit to argue that Dennings’ death is not only exemplary of Pazuzu’s power, but alternatively, represents Regan’s deep-seated distrust of male authority figures.

FORWARD PROGRESSION THROUGH RESTORATION

As previously explored, the first half of *The Exorcist* has inspired a variety of explanations related to the film’s audiovisual rhetoric and subtext. Moreover, many of these concepts gain complimentary pieces of evidence when the midpoint of the film is reached. Perhaps the most comprehensive means of dividing *The Exorcist*’s runtime is to look at the film in terms of its

three acts, and more importantly, its two distinct tonal sections. The re-introduction of Father Merrin roughly halfway through the film is a major turning point towards *The Exorcist*’s climax. Furthermore, the first half of the film deals with the private affairs of the cast as they cope with their respective conflicts. However, the second half of the film brings most of the cast together as loose ends are tied and the demon is confronted (*The Exorcist*). Although the dark tone of the film is generally consistent, the second half of *The Exorcist* is marginally more solemn. Nevertheless, although Merrin’s role in the film is irreplaceable, another crucial turning point takes place in the second act, which is just prior to the character’s re-introduction.

Following Chris’s failed interactions with the medical staff tasked with saving her increasingly deranged daughter, she reaches one of her lowest points in the film. As the *de jure* protagonist of *The Exorcist*, Chris’s emotional journey, and its resolution, are of the utmost importance to the film’s narrative development. Moreover, this resolution is realized through the character of Father Karras. The clergyman finds himself at the center of the conflict with Pazuzu and is ultimately the savior of Regan and the film itself (*The Exorcist*). Nevertheless, Karras’s initial interactions with Chris and Regan are highly abrasive, as he advises against the former’s pleas for an exorcism. Still, he concedes and conducts a private investigation into Regan’s condition on behalf of Chris, all the while insisting that exorcisms are merely emotional replacements for proper medical intervention (*The Exorcist*). This contradictory motivation is at the heart of Father Karras as a character; he is not a man of faith seeking to save the life of an innocent girl, rather, Karras is a man who lacks faith, and whose only motivation to save Regan is that of self-actualization. Every action that Karras makes throughout *The Exorcist* is meant to take him one step closer to restoring his own sense of faith in God and Christianity as a whole.

This concept is best identified through one of Karras's interviews with Pazuzu through the body of Regan. The priest sprinkles tap water over Regan, and the demon's voice bellows out in pain. As he explains to Chris, this reaction would only have occurred if he were sprinkling holy water over Regan's body (*The Exorcist*). The demon reacts in such a way as to undermine Karras's dwindling sense of faith. Moreover, Karras's reaction to this exchange is what solidifies his role in the film's narrative. Williams explains that "the confirmation of Regan's possession as performance comes from her reaction to being doused with unblessed tap water, which Karras tells her is holy water... Karras sets up this deceit as a test to expose Regan's possession as a masquerade, and it works, but he ultimately rejects this evidence and instead pursues the possession route to its fatal conclusion in order to reaffirm his faith" (226). Given the evidence that he is presented with, Karras would have been entirely justified in suspending his working relationship with Chris; however, he decides to move forward, instead. This decision by Karras may be an indication that the driving conflict of the film is not one of demons and spirits, but rather, of human failure in the face of indignation.

Karras is shown to be troubled and increasingly irate at the world around him throughout *The Exorcist*. One would be justified in viewing his character as the catalyst towards a more secular interpretation of the film. Likewise, Williams later states that "Regan's hysteria is a performance in which all actors must take their parts for it to play out successfully, and in this sense the masquerade of demonic possession can never fully be exposed" (226). Williams is not alone in her view of the film, as many other writers and educators have argued in favor of this explanation. Definitively framing *The Exorcist* as a dramatization of a young girl's mental

deterioration is a difficult task; nevertheless, as this paper has presented thus far, such an interpretation is not to be brushed aside without proper consideration.

FROM D.C. TO L.A.

As established, the narrative midpoint of *The Exorcist* is generally agreed to lie within Father Merrin's re-introduction to the film. Shortly after returning home to the United States from Iraq, Merrin is informed that he is to perform an exorcism on Regan MacNeil. Although up to this point, Father Karras has been largely handling Regan's case, he is ultimately relegated to serving as Merrin's assistant (*The Exorcist*). At this point, it is beneficial to acknowledge the extent of *The Exorcist's* mythos. The films, *Exorcist: The Beginning* and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist*, released in 2004 and 2005, respectively, serve as prequels to the 1973 film. Although critically panned, the two films (which are alternative versions of the same backstory) exist to establish Merrin's prior exorcism experience, particularly in regard to his previous confrontations with Pazuzu. Furthermore, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* deals with a similar subject matter, and further develops Merrin's qualifications as a priest. Nevertheless, these supplementary works merely add context to the focal decision in the original *Exorcist* to make Father Merrin the lead clergyman in Regan's exorcism. This decision is perhaps the most important one made throughout the film, as it sets the stage for Karras's final offensive against the demon.

While considering Merrin's qualifications, it is also important to note the role that they play in establishing the theming of the film. Many argue that the church's decision to enlist Merrin's help in Regan's exorcism directly ties into the spiritual framing of the film. Furthermore, the church itself is not alone in this desire, as throughout the film, the demon repeatedly shows interest in meeting with Father Merrin (*The Exorcist*). Once again, this desire is

brought into a clearer context when considering that the two characters have already canonically met. Dudenhoeffer argues that "[Merrin] takes a combative, self-righteous stance in the exorcism... 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" (83). Dudenhoeffer sees the midpoint of *The Exorcist*, along with its resulting fallout, as evidence of the spiritual framing of the film.

Despite Karras's reservations regarding Regan's condition, he nevertheless concedes to the church and his own desires, and agrees to participate in the exorcism. This decision comes in the wake of the previously established evidence against Regan actually being possessed by a demon. Karras, an individual who has been the sole representative of the church in Regan's case up to this point, is passed over for Merrin. Likewise, Merrin, who has been stationed in Nineveh for an undisclosed amount of time, is almost immediately requested to visit Georgetown upon returning to the United States (*The Exorcist*). Furthermore, Merrin's decision to return home to begin with was spurred by the series of omens that he perceived while at the archaeological site during the Iraq sequence. Dudenhoeffer, Schuetz, and others take these details, along with the surrounding context of the film's midpoint, as evidence of the film's narrative intent. Going into the second half of the film, little is done to hide the fact that the climax will be framed by opposing religious and moral forces. Many argue that the subtext of *The Exorcist's* midpoint is indicative of the greater narrative purpose of the film.

Beginning with Father Merrin's re-introduction to the film and ending with the MacNeil's move to Los Angeles, the second half of *The Exorcist* arguably contains the most important

narrative elements of the entire series. As mentioned, this section is headed by the midpoint of the film, which, itself, contains several integral character and plot developments. Likewise, one such interpretation relies upon Pazuzu's relationship with Merrin, and its desire for the ageing priest to lead the exorcism. One may view this arrangement as hinging upon Father Karras's lack of faith, as opposed to Merrin's abundance of it. In this respect, Pazuzu may have called out for Merrin with this in mind; nevertheless, this explanation disregards one of the most obvious character elements of both Karras and Merrin: their ages.

It is well established early in the film that Merrin is both elderly and taking heart medication of some kind (*The Exorcist*). The film does not overtly explain this element, rather, it adds to the notion that Merrin will face significant hardships during his final confrontation with the demon. Concurrently, Karras is shown to be in fine health, as he is a former amateur boxer; in fact, Karras first meets Lt. Kinderman while exercising on the Georgetown University campus (*The Exorcist*). Moreover, these character details establish both the generational and experiential gaps between the two men; Merrin is old and tired from years of service, whereas Karras's conflict lies within himself. As is the case with many who struggle with their identity, the damage is not often seen on the outside. Furthermore, Medhurst notes that "the dynamic conflict of good and evil is fully realized only when Merrin arrives at the front door of the MacNeil house... As the exorcism begins, Karras is still in the state of non-belief... This is visually demonstrated when, following the levitation scene, Karras rushes to the bed to bind the hands of the demon. His faith is not in goodness, but in the physical bonds" (83).

As opposed to simply classifying the differences between Merrin and Karras as proof of the spiritual framing of the film, a greater conclusion can be drawn through their respective

interactions with the demon. Merrin’s role as the lead exorcist and his impending death are both representative of the loss of past ideals. Regardless of Karras’s level of faith, he comes from a far different generation and possesses a much different worldview than Merrin. Although neither character is more right or justified in their tactics, it is not without merit to argue that their narrative purposes go far beyond the religious subject matter of the film. Through this interpretation, *The Exorcist*’s two male leads are central to a secular reading of the film’s theming and subtext.

MULTI-CINEMA AESTHETICS AND SYMBOLIC ACTION

Moving past the midpoint of the film and delving into the actual exorcism attempts by Fathers Merrin and Karras, the audience is introduced to some of the most disturbing imagery present in the film (*The Exorcist*). As with the medical sequences present in the first and second acts of *The Exorcist*, the exorcism sequences in the third act showcase some of the most iconic scenes in the film. Furthermore, these two sets of mirrored sequences also display the two ends of the spectrum present in Friedkin and Blatty’s film. Whereas at the start of the film, Chris immediately turns to medical, psychological, and physiological experts in their respective fields, by the end of *The Exorcist*, she has resorted to spiritual and religious guidance. A point is made to establish that both Chris and Regan are not especially religious early in the film (*The Exorcist*). Moreover, this dichotomy between the theistic and the nontheistic is one of, if not the most prevalent theme present in the film. Much debate has arisen regarding the various interpretations associated with the exorcism sequences, and in particular, Regan’s possessed behavior during the attempts to free her from the demon.

Without delving too deeply into the abhorrent details associated with Regan's third act behavior, it is important to first compare such characteristics with her behavior during her interviews with Karras earlier in the film (*The Exorcist*). As mentioned prior in this paper, a common argument associated with this sequence insists that Regan's behavior is meant to demonstrate the extent to which she has been possessed by the demon (Dudenhoeffer 84). Likewise, a similar view presents itself when discussing the nature of the exorcism sequences in the final act of the film; Robert F. Willson, Jr., a noted professor of English and cinema, views *The Exorcist* through such a lens. While examining the nature of film's "multi-cinema aesthetics," Willson argues that "the film's central motif is in fact regurgitation, what with the heavy doses of vomiting, urinating, spitting, profaning, as well as what might be called metaphoric emission in the form of bodies exiting through windows and furniture flying through rooms" (183). Those who agree with Willson insist that the abnormal, and at times, supernatural behavior exhibited by Regan in the exorcism sequences demonstrates the reach that Pazuzu has achieved while occupying her body.

Furthermore, Willson does not stop at this assessment, as he goes on to insist that "Friedkin and other modern directors, many of whom have been reared in TV production, think more in terms of realistic effects than in terms of suggestion. The audience they envision seems to be an audience of one or two, rather than a mass of viewers" (186). When comparing this view to the previous interpretation of Regan's behavior, a greater explanation is brought forth regarding the subtext associated with *The Exorcist's* third act, and in particular, the exorcism sequences themselves. One may argue that Regan's abrasive words and actions not only establish the extent of her possession, but additionally, they are kept largely plausible as a means to further

engage the audience. The rhetoric associated with the final act of *The Exorcist* has become infamous since it first appeared in 1973. Moreover, the supernatural elements of the film are largely left untouched until late into the running time. Willson and others argue that such a decision was intentionally made, as the more realistic elements of Regan's third act characteristics better demonstrate her loss of identity. Therefore, this defiling of a young girl's body and mind may be the most convenient place from which to present the maliciousness of the demon possessing her.

As opposed to those who insist that Regan's late film behavior is purely representative of her possession, there are those who argue in relative contradiction. A rising view of Regan's character during the exorcism sequences argues that her more antagonistic elements are indicative of the psychological elements present in the film. Penny Crofts, a respected faculty of law, rather bluntly explains that "it seems unjust that Regan is possessed. There is no real reason for her possession" (390). Viewing Regan's condition through the lens of a secular interpretation, Crofts goes on to argue that "the film could be read as explaining Regan's possession or rebellion as due to her desire to remain locked in a close dyadic relationship with her mother... the mother's sexual frustrations become Regan's lewd suggestions; the mother's anger becomes Regan's power... The film exonerates her for her terrible deeds, but punishes the mother... for disrupting her relationship with Regan" (390). Crofts views *The Exorcist* as a vessel for the psychological subtext present within Chris and Regan's relationship; not only is Regan's condition indicative of her possessed status, but additionally, it demonstrates the unspoken dynamic between her and Chris.

With the exceptions of Lt. Kinderman and Father Dyer (who later co-star in *The Exorcist III*), every leading male character who comes into contact with Chris either dies at the hands of Regan, or dies while in contact with her. Burke Dennings is thrown out of Regan’s bedroom window; Father Karras commits suicide by jumping out of her window; and Father Merrin suffers a heart attack, either directly due to Pazuzu or due to coincidental natural causes (*The Exorcist*). Ultimately, Regan has Chris to herself by the end of the exorcism sequences - regardless of whether it was of her own volition or not. Through this interpretation, one may gain an alternative view of Regan’s possessed activities during the final act of the film. Moving beyond Willson and others’ surface level view of the exorcism sequences, this interpretation allows for a greater breadth of subtextual argumentation.

REBIRTH AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Although considerably briefer than many of the other notable sequences present throughout the film, the climax sequence of *The Exorcist* is the culmination of the work’s two-hour runtime. Following several exorcism attempts by Fathers Merrin and Karras, the two men grow tired, and Karras in particular begins to fall back upon his depressive state from earlier in the film. Following a critical moment where Karras loses his composure and fails to objectively assist Merrin in the exorcism of the demon, the elder priest instructs him to leave Regan’s bedroom (*The Exorcist*). Whether this decision was a fatal mistake or an advanced maneuver by Merrin, it remains unclear. However, upon Karras’s return to the bedroom, Merrin’s lifeless body is discovered as the possessed Regan laughs in joy.

From this point, the defining moment of *The Exorcist* plays out: Karras, overtaken with anger for the demon and a desire to avenge Merrin, proclaims, “Take me!” Obliging, the demon

is implied to have left Regan’s body and entered Karras’s. Sensing his humanity leaving him, Karras throws himself through Regan’s bedroom window - the same window that Burke Dennings was thrown through - and tumbles to his death down the now famous “*Exorcist* steps” in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. (*The Exorcist*). Similar to many of the other central sequences found throughout the film, such as the ones involving Iraq, the medical procedures, the Karras interviews, and the exorcism attempts, the climax sequence of *The Exorcist* has drawn much disagreement and attention in recent years. Many have debated the meaning behind both the nature of Karras’s sacrifice, and his motivation for performing such an act to begin with.

Drawing similarities between the aforementioned arguments in favor of Karras’s desire to restore his faith, many educators and analysts have interpreted the climax sequence as a show of the priest’s martyrdom and symbolic rebirth. Thomas S. Frenz and Thomas B. Farrell, both of whom are noted professors of communication, note that Karras “becomes for the audience, an idealized model of the state of mind necessary to combat successfully the evils of positivistic thought. Of course, Karras does not easily slip into his role of the ultimate mystic... [the audience initially finds] Karras arrogant, flip, and supremely confident in the capacity of medical science to cure any malady imaginable” (44). Frenz and Farrell, among others, argue that the climax sequence of *The Exorcist* is meant to highlight the spiritual journey of Father Karras. Furthermore, the sequence is also meant to act as the conclusion to three acts worth of juxtaposition between the dwindling faith of Karras, and the increasingly spiritual world that he finds himself in.

Throughout the late first and early to middle second acts, Karras is shown to be dismissive of Chris’s concerns that Regan may actually be possessed. The above argument

regarding the young priest’s character implies that these moments are merely the build up towards his eventual sacrifice at the end of the film. This act could be meant to represent Karras’s renewed faith, as throughout the film, he struggles with his spiritual identity. By allowing himself to die, he also proves that his faith is not deterred by threat of possession, judgement, or any other miscellaneous factor. Therefore, Frenzt and Farrell view Karras’s suicide as an act of martyrdom, as through his death, the demon not only leaves Regan, but is implied to have been killed, itself. Of course, William Peter Blatty later penned *Legion*, a sequel novel to *The Exorcist*, and additionally, two sequel films were released in 1977 and 1990, respectively. All these works feature the demon, Pazuzu, to some degree. However, Frenzt and Farrell’s interpretation of Karras’s death still holds merit within the stand-alone canon of the 1973 film. Keeping this argument in mind, the climax sequence of *The Exorcist* contains several debatable elements in terms of both its rhetorical content and narrative progression.

Contrary to the interpretation presented by Frenzt and Farrell, many view Karras’s death and the climax sequence as indicative of the greater instances of social commentary found throughout the film. Olney, taking a rather confrontational stance towards the film, argues that “*The Exorcist*, while seemingly invested in the spectacle of the rebellious, possessed female body, actually works to preserve the patriarchal order by purging it of the monstrous-feminine” (561). Regardless of one’s views of the film, it is difficult to argue against the elements of social hierarchy maintained throughout the work. At both the start and end of the film, Chris and Regan are a two-member family living with a small handful of houseworkers (*The Exorcist*). Although the same male characters living at the start of the film are not necessarily alive at the end of the film, it is male characters all throughout the narrative who largely control the plot progression.

Beyond Chris's initial insistence that Regan be seen by an exorcist, few plot actions are determined by female characters. Moreover, in her possessed state, Regan's power surpasses that of Fathers Merrin and Karras, combined; ultimately, only a final act of desperation by Karras can defeat the demon. By doing so, Regan's authority is brought back down to a level lower than that of the male characters, and the patriarchal structure is therefore maintained. Nevertheless, Olney and Frenz and Farrell's views of the climax sequence are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Williams, herself writing from a feminist critique angle, admits that "Karras, who initially asserts the psychiatric diagnosis, invests in the Devil inside Regan which he mimics through his own possession in order to triumph over his crisis of faith" (232). Both the spiritual and secular views of *The Exorcist's* climax sequence are capable of being argued concurrently. However, dismissing one explanation on the basis of the other does little to further the conversation.

FORWARD PROGRESSION THROUGH THE LOSS OF PAST IDEALS

Following the harrowing events of the final exorcism sequence, the film winds down as it resolves several plot lines and ongoing character relationships. Just as a crowd begins to form around the dying Father Karras, at the bottom of the steps outside of the MacNeil's house, Father Dyer approaches his friend and delivers his last rites (*The Exorcist*). This exchange is the culmination of the two men's relationship seen throughout the film; whereas Karras's character is based around his crumbling sense of faith, Dyer is confident in his set of beliefs. Acting as a foil to Karras in many ways, Dyer being present at his friend's death is indicative of the completion of Karras's character arc. After saving the life of Regan and avenging Father Merrin's death, Karras, as a fictional character, no longer has any purpose in the story. Therefore, his death may be interpreted as representing the restoration of his faith. Nevertheless, after witnessing the

deaths of several individuals and countless traumatic experiences, Chris decides to move herself and Regan to Los Angeles, California (*The Exorcist*).

At the surface level, this decision connects with Chris's career as an actress and, perhaps, her desire to live closer to the film industry in Hollywood. Moreover, California is on the opposite side of the United States from Washington, D.C., and both symbolically and literally puts a considerable amount of space between Regan and the site of her possession. Just as the MacNeils and their housekeepers prepare to leave their home in Georgetown, Father Dyer and Lt. Kinderman appear, each respectively seeking closure from the events involving the deaths of Dennings, Merrin, and Karras. After a bittersweet exchange between Regan and Dyer, the MacNeils drive off, leaving the two men to their own devices. Striking up a lighthearted conversation, the two walk off, indicating a possible future friendship between them (*The Exorcist*). In fact, this exchange was not present in the theatrical cut of the film, rather, it was added into the director's cut as a necessary link between *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcist III*, released in 1990. Nevertheless, the final scenes of *The Exorcist* are indicative of a greater theme present throughout much of the film.

As discussed, in regard to the midpoint of the film, a number of verifiable differences exist between Fathers Merrin and Karras. The classification of these differences can be interpreted as representing the loss of past ideals. Merrin, being the senior priest and titular character, is seen as more experienced and worldly than Karras. As a matter of fact, Merrin's first scenes take place at an archaeological dig in Iraq, whereas all of Karras's scenes take place within the Georgetown neighborhood (*The Exorcist*). The decision to have Merrin lead Regan's exorcism is made immediately, despite the fact that Karras had been leading his own

investigation up to that point. During the discussion which leads to this decision, church officials cite Merrin's experience and Karras's lack thereof (*The Exorcist*). Throughout the production of *The Exorcist*, a clear decision was made to illustrate a vast world of differences between the two main priests.

Furthermore, this view is not unfounded, as Medhurst notes that even "though Karras visits Regan and attempts to diagnose her condition from a psychiatric perspective, he is nevertheless powerless to confront the phenomenon he observes. When he goes to his superiors in the Church it is not as a gesture of faith, but as one who has confronted evil and lost" (82). Moreover, Medhurst sees this reluctant character decision as a shortcoming of Karras, himself. Medhurst argues that "Karras is simply following his institutional impulse without making any personal commitment to the efficacy of exorcism as a mode of treatment" (82). Nevertheless, whereas Karras struggles against his own fading religiosity and logical reasoning, Merrin immediately steps into action when confronted with the prospect of an exorcism. In fact, Medhurst, Ager, and others view Merrin's sudden move from Iraq back to the United States as his preparation for an impending confrontation with Pazuzu. Nevertheless, the theme of the loss of past ideals extends beyond independent character details. At the conclusion of the film, following Merrin's sudden death in Regan's bedroom, Karras, with a renewed sense of faith, immediately picks up where his senior left off and ultimately saves Regan's life. Ironically, it appears as though an actual exorcism never occurs, as the demon simply changes hosts when prompted to by Karras (*The Exorcist*).

Nevertheless, this sequence is perhaps the most supportive of the loss of past ideals theme present throughout the film, as with Merrin's actual death, a symbolic death of his

generation's morality also occurs. Whereas Merrin patiently and professionally conducts his exorcism of Regan, Karras, upon seeing the former's death, grows enraged and attacks Regan. Although Karras ultimately sacrifices himself for Regan's safety, the means he utilizes to achieve this outcome are far different from Merrin's. Furthermore, as chronologically shown in the film, Merrin's techniques prove to be futile, as the demon never intended to allow itself to be forcibly removed by either Merrin or Karras. In the end, it takes Karras's abrasive behaviors to save Regan from the demon - not Merrin's quiet and respectful procedures.

CONCLUSION

Despite the argument that the rhetoric used in 1973's *The Exorcist* definitively adheres to a theistic interpretation, when examined more closely, the film is revealed to simultaneously support and contradict this interpretation through its use of secular theming and subtext. As demonstrated, despite the significant evidence presented by both sides of this discussion, the arguments surrounding the rhetorical implications of *The Exorcist* continue to remain highly divisive nearly half a century after the film's release. Medhurst notes that "much of the critical response to *The Exorcist* has been generated by the misinterpretation of the central value assertion. The film has been described as emphasizing 'the struggle between good and evil,' the 'growing fascination with the supernatural,' the 'underground anxieties, fantasies and fears' of contemporary American society, and the philosophy of 'the devil made me to do it'" (75). Beyond the academic and critical evaluations of the film, the general populace had, and continues to have, vastly juxtaposing views on the subject matter presented within *The Exorcist*. Even the personal religious views of the film's original audiences indicate that *The Exorcist's* rhetoric is seen as far less definitive than many insist it to be.

In a study conducted by Kent State University in 1976, it was found that amongst individuals who were familiar with the film's subject matter, a greater number of believers in prayer opted not to view the film. Likewise, it was found that viewers of the film were less likely to actually believe in prayer (Vincenzo, Hendrick, and Murray 143). However, the study also found that religious individuals who attended the film were more likely to believe in exorcisms than religious individuals who did not attend the film (Vincenzo, Hendrick, and Murray 140). Nevertheless, this data merely acts as yet another contributing factor towards the ambiguity of *The Exorcist's* rhetoric. Through looking at the information regarding the original audiences of the film, a strong trend of indecisiveness presents itself. Furthermore, through taking this discussion from the medical angle, another fascinating conversation arises. As Medhurst, Crofts, and nearly every academic quoted throughout this paper has noted, not only was *The Exorcist* controversial at the time of its release, but a not insignificant number of medical complications arose among certain audience members.

Dr. James C. Bozzuto, a psychiatrist now based out of Hartford, Connecticut, wrote about these strange occurrences in 1975, which was just two years after the film's release. Studying four cases in particular, Bozzuto found that the patients, all of whom were Christians, had similar symptoms following their respective viewings on the film; these symptoms included insomnia, appetite loss, decreased sexual functioning, paranoia, hostility towards parental figures, and suicidal thoughts, among others (46). Bozzuto and Kent State's studies are not the only ones of their kind; these strange occurrences have been explored, reported, and presented on a number of occasions and through a number of sources. Ironically, the controversies surrounding the

presentation of *The Exorcist*’s rhetoric have all but overshadowed the various storied debates concerning the nature of the film’s rhetoric.

Nevertheless, it is integral to take note of the cultural importance that *The Exorcist* possesses, particularly in the United States. The mid to late 20th century was a time of political and cultural change, both in the United States and abroad (Zinoman 38). One might argue that it was inevitable that such a controversial and divisive work of art as *The Exorcist* would be created during this period. Nevertheless, the goal of this paper is not to contradict the views of several well-respected academics and scholars, nor is it to imply that *The Exorcist* is completely irreligious, and that any opposing explanation is unfounded. If anything, the vast array of opinions presented show that rhetorical analysis is far from an undebatable field. In fact, the arguments surrounding the analyses of film and media are some of the most dynamic and diverse in all of academia.

Likewise, in an exclusive interview with *Eurozine*, Dr. Slavoj Žižek, a renowned writer and philosopher, argues that characters like Regan MacNeil represent the extent to which language and its rhetoric can animate humanity on screen (Rösing 4). The effective use of audiovisual rhetoric has created some of the most memorable and moving stories in fiction, while simultaneously leading to just as many debates regarding those stories. The rhetoric used in William Friedkin and William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* is perhaps one of the greatest examples of this phenomenon. The consistent back and forth among those who study films such as *The Exorcist* may oftentimes seem like competing advertisements on behalf of their respective views. Fittingly, this scenario is indirectly described by the original 1971 novel that *The Exorcist* is based off. In one of the final scenes of the book, Chris and Father Dyer are reflecting on the

deaths of Fathers Merrin and Karras. After Dyer asks Chris what her beliefs are, now that Regan has supposedly been exorcised, she comments that “‘you come to God and you have to figure if there is one, then he must need a million years' sleep every night or else he tends to get irritable. Know what I mean? [God] never talks. But the devil keeps advertising, Father. The devil does lots of commercials’” (Blatty 425). Indeed, the evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that, regardless of one’s views, *The Exorcist* continues to possess an irreplaceable role in the discourse surrounding 20th century cinema.

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