

Catholic Horror

The Exorcist, 1973

“Have you ever heard of exorcism? Well, it's a stylized ritual in which the rabbi or the priest try to drive out the so-called invading spirit. It's been pretty much discarded these days except by the Catholics who keep it in the closet as a sort of an embarrassment, but uh, it has worked.”

Production Information

Based on bestselling book by William Blatty published in 1971. Grossed \$165 million at the box office, making it one of the most profitable films of the 1970s. Surpassed *The Godfather* (1972) in gross receipts. Exceedingly popular immediately at its release. Regan McNeil (Linda Blair), Chris McNeil (Ellen Burstyn), Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller, a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright) Father Lancaster Merrin (Max Von Sydow).

Watch the 1973 not recent re-releases. Different ending, extras. Who's film is it? Blatty likes the later version.

Film History

Good example of the horror film genre that includes manipulating the primitive fears and expectations of audience. Opened day after Christmas and film caused people run from theater screaming and fainting. Critics called it raw, obscene, painful experience. Upset mostly about focus of evil on a child. However, most reviews were very positive including religious ones. Given an “R” rating since contained "no overt sex" and "no excessive violence." Catholic magazines commended it's portrayal of the priests and of the reality of the devil and evil.

Shift in the place of religion in horror films of the fifties. Evil is not defeated; demons not scared off by crosses and holy water. Spin off many similar films of possession and religion as well as sequels and prequels. None with the same level of writing.

1954 painting Empire of Light ("L'Empire des lumières") by René Magritte was inspiration for lamppost shot.

Social History

Questioning cultural authorities.

Nixon and associates covering up illegal activities of the Republican re-election campaign exposed in the “Watergate” scandals. VP Spiro Agnew resigns due to charges of income tax evasion. January of 1973 Peace treaty signed to “end” war in Vietnam.

Both events read by many in the country as indicative of a government which lies and misleads nation. Vietnam in particular provides sense that “authorities” got it wrong and that protesters and critics of the war were correct. General distrust of government.

Supreme Court ruling on Roe v. Wade, legalizing abortion in the first trimester. Rise of the anti-abortion movement and the conservative backlash against women’s movement.

Religious History

Rev. Thomas Bermingham, advisor on set. Convincing portrayal of priests in a world before the sex abuse scandals.

Post Vatican II. Positive appraisal of movie by Catholic press. Why? Liberalizing of church and openness to adult questioning. Skepticism permitted. Priests can be real men who drink and have fears and work-out.

Jesuits: Religious order of men founded by Spaniard, Ignatius Loyola in 1540 initially to fight against Muslims and later Protestants. Missionaries to China, India, South America. Focused attention not on converting average people but in persuading the elite. Highly educated and powerful and thus controversial (in 1773 pope dissolved order, restored in 1814). Run significant US colleges—Georgetown, Fordham, Loyola College.

Exorcism: driving out of demons from the possessed. Demons as “fallen angels” who were prideful. Jesus casting out demons in New Testament and Paul in Acts 16:18. Lay people cast out demons. Demons in other things in addition to people, so casting out of demons in water, salt, By middle of third century and established order of “exorcists” (along with other religious functionaries like “readers” and “doorkeepers.”) One of their early roles was to participate in the exorcism of the devil from candidates for baptism (originally adults not children). This carried over to modern time in Catholic baptismal rite, “do you renounce Satan.” Independent exorcist ceased and role given over to priests who were given power in their ordinations. Ritual is laid out: Discernment that not something else, another disease. Priest should be humble and pious. Should fast in preparation. Exorcism should take place in a church with family present. No questioning of the demon. Priest in stole and surplice with crucifix and holy water. Changes in 1960s: the possessed are not responsible, they are innocents. Need to use biblical texts. Elaborate, 13 page long text.

The inspiration for the book (published 1971) on which the movie was based dates back to a real episode of exorcism that occurred in 1949. Writer William Blatty was at Georgetown University and had read a *Washington Post* (20 August 1949) of an exorcism that was several months long. Reported in book, *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism*, 1993.

Rise of conservative Christianity. Within Catholicism, criticism of Vatican II on two fronts. Blatty’s intention to “prove” God by “proving” devil. Election of a conservative

Paul VI who rejects his advisors and prohibits artificial birth control in *Humanae Vitae* (1968). Sense by many average Catholics that Vatican II went to far eliminating importance of the supernatural and authority of priests. Hollywood claiming supernatural religion that had been deleted from churches. Catholics in US do not attack the film. Evangelicals, especially Pentecostals, taking seriously demons and angels. Billy Graham's famous, "the devil is in the film itself" comment. Evangelicals believing in existence of Satanism among youth. Seeing Halloween as a Satanic holiday (not celebrated in conservative churches). By 2004 seventy percent of Americans said they believed in Satan.

Re-establishment of exorcism among Christians. Flurry of books in late 70s and 80s. Now believed in and practiced by Protestants more than Catholics. Even liberals, see M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (1982) and *Glimpses of the Devil* (2005). Evangelicals call exorcism, "ministry of deliverance." Christian form of psychotherapy.

Questions to think about:



Why does the insertion of Christianity into this film make it a more horrifying horror film?

In the "original" exorcism the person who was possessed was a boy. Why do you think they changed it in the movie to be a girl?

Why do you think the film was so popular?

