



*Since the rise of the cinematic horror genre, the way people view the occult has drastically shifted. The 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby* introduced the idea that a Satanist may not be the misunderstood teenager lurking under bleachers, but rather your own friends, neighbors, or colleagues. A slew of demonic horror movies followed *Rosemary's Baby*, and with them the fear that demonic entities waited around every corner. From the news media to film, there has been widespread misinformation regarding the practice of Catholic exorcisms, the presence of Satan in the modern world, and the nature of Hell itself. As evidenced in the case of Latoya Ammons and her children, the influence of demonic exorcism extends well beyond the screen.*

Introduction

It is human nature to be fascinated by things we do not understand, and even more so by the ones that horrify us. Such is the case with films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), a movie that is often accredited with beginning the demonic trend in the cinematic horror genre. Scholars such as Jeffrey Zacks suggest that movies have scientific, observable effects on the human brain that extend beyond the film's conclusion. The impression horror movies leave on audiences has increased as films have transitioned from theaters directly into homes and become more accessible to the public. The occult craze sparked by

horror movies has gradually taken root in news media, too, with recent possession cases such as that of Latoya Ammons and her children inciting fear and excitement in the public without inquiries for concrete evidence. Before the age of technology and television, people could not easily obtain religious knowledge from sources outside the church, instead relying on word-of-mouth and printed text. Because this information is now in great quantity and easily accessible, there is far more opportunity for the public to take interest in it. Therefore, since the release of movies such as *Rosemary's Baby* and with the growing accessibility of horror films, there has been a rise in public obsession and interaction with the occult. The religious fear that plagued America

throughout the 1960s and 70s was worsened by the emergence of demonic horror and contributed to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, in part because of the influence of such movies. Many consumers obtain their information primarily from news broadcasts or fictitious horror movies and do not attempt to conduct further research. Despite the fact that nearly every culture in the world has a tradition of possession and exorcism, most modern Americans picture the Catholic practice because of its overwhelming presence in demonic horror films. News and movie media sensationalizing instances of demonic possession has led to widespread harmful misconceptions about the practice of Catholic exorcisms, the role of demons in religion, and what demonic possession could actually look like in the real world.

Why do horror movies work?

Rosemary's Baby was unprecedented in its box office success and the first movie of its kind. For the first time, the idea that your neighbor, teacher, or your friend could be a devout Satanist was introduced, starkly contrasting the idea that Satanists were only people who wore black cloaks and presented themselves in opposition to traditional Christian society. In the film, the protagonist, Rosemary, is delivered a dessert by her seemingly unthreatening neighbor; unbeknownst to her, the food is laced with Satanic herbs and, later that night, Rosemary is raped and impregnated by the Devil. The film, depicting frightening situations such as this, only worsened the religious fear that was plaguing the United States at the time. This fear followed the release of books such as Hal Lindsey's *Late, Great Planet Earth*, which convinced many Americans that the Antichrist was alive and walking among them (Wiggins 127-128). *Rosemary's Baby* was considered one of the most frightening horror movies in existence at this time, playing on people's pre-existing religious fear in a way

that was unique unto itself. The first audiences of *Rosemary's Baby* responded to the film in a way that created huge demand for other movies of similar design, but the rise of demonic forces in film led to unforeseen side effects. Movies, unlike other forms of media, "are strange because they present perceptual experiences that can be vivid and realistic evokers of behavior" (Zacks 21). In other words, humans are exceptionally visual, hands-on creatures. Few other mediums have the capability of making a person feel like they are truly present in the story, going as far as to trick the human subconscious into experiencing fear, panic, or even a fight-or-flight response. Why this happens lies in the fact that humans are biologically hardwired to respond to visual stimuli, especially when they could result in bodily harm. Horror movies are effective because of the human brain's instinct to react, such as when a person mimics the facial expressions or mannerisms of someone sitting opposite them (Zacks 5-7). Because watching horror movies is such a visceral experience for the audience, they may walk away from the film with a lasting fear of whatever was depicted—even if they consciously know it is not real.

How much should we trust horror films?

The film *Rosemary's Baby* began a trend of demonic horror, one that is still popular to this day. Even as recently as *The Conjuring* and *Paranormal Activity* franchises, the concept of malevolent demonic possession captures human attention in a way other subgenres of horror do not. These paranormal films, however, often play with the audience's credulity. For example, many horror movies—including the first *Paranormal Activity*—begin with a dark screen lit only by words such as "based on true events," even when this is not the case. When the general public sees a message like this, they are inclined to believe the filmmaker.

The Case of Latoya Ammons

However, as in the case of *The Blair Witch Project*, film scholar Diana Pasulka writes, “The situation can become even trickier when a movie presents itself as history but plays fast and loose with the facts. If I am trying to learn real history, does an inaccurate ‘true story’ movie help or hurt?” (Zacks 95). Furthermore, Pasulka continues:

. . . the producers of *The Blair Witch Project* explicitly inked their blurring of fact and fiction to a ‘real experience.’ Crossing the line between reality and fantasy allowed them to provide a visceral experience that was effective because of the audience’s active confusion, not despite it. It didn’t matter whether spectators believed the movie was real found footage or not; that is the point” (Pasulka 539).

The *Conjuring* movies are excellent examples of this strategy, as Ed and Lorraine Warren were real people involved in alleged cases of possession, but the directors of *The Conjuring* films have admitted they took creative liberty with the events that took place in order to produce a more entertaining plot. Audiences place an unspoken trust in the creators of the film to have conducted proper research and have the plot be rooted in religious canon—that is, adhering to religious beliefs as dictated by the institution itself or its holy texts. Even when the movie itself is fiction in every other regard, movies like these are able to find success in the box office because of the public’s instinct to believe the creator.



In actuality, possession in the real world would not match the image that has been formed from watching horror movies such as the ones mentioned above. Few people in the Christian tradition are qualified to perform an exorcism, the most recognizable of which are Catholic priests. Exorcisms by authorized individuals are not easily given in today’s Church, nor are they typically as unpredictable and violent as the ones depicted in movies such as *The Conjuring*. Catholic priests must obtain permission from the bishop of their diocese in order to perform an exorcism—a request which is not commonly approved, though the rule has been known to be broken at times throughout history (Laycock 277). In 2011, the priest involved in the case of Latoya Ammons and her children, Father Michael Maginot, was one of the few modern ordained priests granted permission to perform an exorcism by a bishop. Father Maginot of Gary, Indiana was insistent that he would not proceed with the exorcism of the Ammons’ children without it. He even went as far as to submit a police report and DVD recording of the investigation into the Ammons house to his bishop as proof of why an exorcism was necessary (Laycock 277 and 284). The Ammons children had been reported to display multiple signs of demonic possession, the most famous of which being when one of the children walked backwards up a wall. In the Ammons home, the mother and grandmother reported hearing footsteps after midnight with no one present to make them, along with seeing flickering lights, a shadowy male figure, and muddy footprints across the living room floor (Laycock 278). These sightings are nothing surprising with a case of demonic possession, but it can be difficult to distinguish paranormal influence from regular household issues. For example, swarms of flies had been presented as a sign of demonic activity in the 1979 film *The Amityville Horror*, and a similar issue with the pests was reported in the

Ammons home. The flies very well could have been just that: flies. However, those involved with the case interpreted the flies as evidence of possession, a conclusion which could have been influenced by *The Amityville Horror*. After the exorcism of the Ammons children took place, the family moved. According the scholar Joseph Laycock who analyzed this case:

In 2014, Zak Bagans, host of the show *Ghost Adventures*, purchased the house in Gary. This led to weeks of sensationalized media coverage about the Ammons case [and] Ammons and Maginot gave interviews on cable news shows. (Laycock 277)

Having taken place long after the release of films like *Rosemary's Baby* and in the height of the horror genre, this case of possession piqued the interest of many news stations and their viewers. For someone watching a news segment about the Ammons, it was easier to believe the reported events when they matched with what was considered common knowledge about demonic possession, as in the case with the footsteps and flies. Whether or not one believes the Ammons' claims, many of those interested in this case would no doubt have their perceptions shrouded by what they had learned about demons through the Hollywood industry.

News Media and the Satanic Panic

Horror movies are not solely responsible for the so-called "demonic craze." Instances of possession like the Ammons' are broadcast on news networks across the world, sometimes sensationalized to the point that the only explanation is possession. The case of Latoya Ammons has become a particularly well-known instance of demonic activity. The possession of the Ammons children, while one of many, is well known in part because of the influence of Zak Bagans, who became involved with the property and went on to demolish the house in 2014 (Laycock 277). Though

cases of demonic possession may or may not be true, public interest in them has not wavered. As the United States has developed and become more technologically involved, interest in holistic practices, spiritualism, and the pursuit of so-called "instant gratification" have become more popular. Horror movies containing witchcraft, demons, and other supernatural entities are available to watch on every streaming platform, requiring no more effort than the click of a button. Films like this have primed the public to accept exorcism, and, as author Michael Cuneo writes:

In addition to being conditioned by the popular entertainment industry, the practice of exorcism in contemporary America is remarkably well-suited to the therapeutic ethos of the prevailing culture ... With its promises of therapeutic well-being and rapid-fire emotional gratification, exorcism is oddly at home in the shopping mall culture, the purchase-of-happiness culture, of turn-of-the-century America. (Cuneo 459)

Some may view exorcisms as one of the holistic medical practices that have been on the rise in the United States and consider getting one a quick way to fix whatever issue they are experiencing in their personal lives. Unlike yoga and acupuncture therapy, which are practices meant to strengthen or heal the body, exorcism can tend to sickness of the mind. Exorcisms obtained "under the table" by individuals unauthorized by a Catholic Diocese are often cheap with short waiting times and far easier to obtain than ones performed by a qualified priest (Cuneo 459). For those not interested in receiving an exorcism themselves, though, they are simply viewed as an unorthodox means of entertainment.

The average person watching a news broadcast about the possession of Latoya Ammons would do so through the scope of what they have learned from pop culture, knowingly or not. *The Conjuring*, *Paranormal Activity*, and *The Exorcist* are only a few of the films which have influenced the general public's

knowledge about exorcisms, the last of which being one of the most successful horror films of all time. *The Exorcist*, originally a book based on a real case of possession, began to experience a resurgence in 1983 with the new accessibility of cable TV, and home video and news media became increasingly interested in Satan and his servants (Beard 212). The Satanic Panic of the 1980s was, in part, instigated by the release of demon-centric films, and in return the demand for this genre of movie increased. During this decade and those following, as horror expert Drew Beard writes:

Children were viewed as particularly at risk, spending an increasing amount of time in front of televisions ... often playing and replaying images and narratives of Hollywood- produced supernatural oppression of the innocent and vulnerable ... Cinematic representations became a source, along with sensationalized news stories and talk shows. (Beard 213)

This cycle of consuming and regurgitating the things seen on screen created a feedback loop, with the moral panic surrounding Satan growing further as television media became more accessible throughout the country. Several ideas about demons and Satan were formed in response to this movement, and many people have suffered in contemporary America because of claims of Satanic influence. From the McMartin Preschool trial to Dan and Fran Keller's two-decade-long prison sentence for unfounded accusations of Satanism and ritualist torture of children, the aftershocks of the initial Satanic Panic last to this day.

Satan: Humanity's Antagonist

The version of Satan that the general public knows is one of the many misconceptions that has emerged from the horror industry and news coverage following the Satanic Panic. The Devil, Satan, and Lucifer are all different names for the same biblical

antagonist that is constantly evolving and changing as human society does. In fact, as scholar Steve Wiggins explains:

Satan is not a carefully delineated character in the Bible. Indeed, the unified character of 'the Devil' didn't fully emerge until the Middle Ages, and had never been described in scripture as a red-skinned man with cloven hooves and horns" (Wiggins 122-123).

This image of Satan has gained popularity with the rise of horror films, and the Devil has transformed from a passive tempter of humanity to an active antagonist intending to inflict physical harm. The concept of the Antichrist is equally as feared as Lucifer himself, and many horror movies have prolonged the fear that gripped Christian America during the 1980s by using the Antichrist as a driving factor in their plots. People in movies and on the news cite the Antichrist as the reason for many possessions, not realizing that the concept of Satan and the Antichrist did not form as we know them until recently.

Cinematic horror, though an extraordinary form of entertainment and one of the most successful genres in the film industry, has influenced the religious expectations people have of "Evil" in this world. As mentioned previously, the word "exorcism" invokes an image of violence and priests acting in the name of God rather than their diocese. If asked to draw a picture of the Devil, the finished product would likely possess horns and a pterodactyl tail (Wiggins 123). "Curing" demonic possession, as in the case of Latoya Ammons, is a process that—at least in the Catholic tradition—has many hoops to jump through and people to convince. While scholars of religion may be difficult to persuade, the general public is not. The minds of Americans have been primed by the horror movie industry and exacerbated by news coverage and television series like *Ghost Adventures*. Do not misunderstand, exorcisms can and have resulted in bodily harm, as in the case of

Anneliese Michel, the famous German woman who endured over 60 exorcisms in the 1970s before dying from “negligent homicide” at the hands of Catholic priests, but these cases are not the majority as some would expect. Jesus Christ himself is argued to have only performed one exorcism, if it can truly be considered that, when he cast the Gerasene demoniac into a herd of pigs that committed suicide shortly after (Matthew 8:28-34).

Conclusion

Horror movies released since the 1960s have greatly influenced people’s perceptions of demonology, exorcisms, and religious practices, along with news media coverage of Satanic rituals. Religious fear is not a new concept and can be observed in instances such as the witch trials that plagued New England during the 1600s, but horror and Satanic influence have never been as accessible as they are now. Where before technology many people had to rely on word-of-mouth to hear about demons, now one simply has to turn on their TV. Furthermore, many people in modern times do not obtain their religious information primarily from canonical texts, but rather the media that is presented to them. Due to the media and pop culture’s presentation of real instances of alleged demonic activity, fictitious aspects of these cases have been taken as fact by the public. Stated simply, the media’s representation of possession is inflated to garner more viewers and audiences are inclined to believe them. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as Hollywood exists primarily for entertainment purposes, but when a movie states “based on true events,” or the case being discussed is on the news rather than in a film, it is unwise to pitch things like exorcism as bigger than they are. As discussed earlier, many people are unwilling to do research outside the movie once it’s done. Perhaps, like at the beginning of a book, there should be a preceding notice that the events in the story/movie have been altered or

created solely for the film. A phenomenon exists in which a person sometimes consumes a form of media—whether it be a book, movie, or news segment—and takes what they learn at face value. If America ever wishes to truly lessen the Satanic Panic still rippling through the country today, the general public must begin to consider the consequences of believing everything horror movies like *Rosemary’s Baby* tell us.

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