

The Devil in the American Horror Film:  
A Study on the Interfacing of Religion, Myth, and Film

by

Lucas Eric Harold Bergeson

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Lucas Eric Harold Bergeson has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Religion.

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Jonathan Walters

Whitman College  
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## Introduction

Horror is visceral, it is unpleasant, and it is difficult to describe. As a storytelling genre, it is no less perplexing. It is perpetually fascinating that the genre of horror continues to survive within every medium of storytelling, but also that it even exists to begin with. However, it cannot be denied that there are both creators and consumers of horror as art, and horror in the form of stories. For some reason, people like to scare others, and people like to be scared themselves. While it is impossible to determine exactly how the development of horror in relation to the development of storytelling in general occurred, it seems evident that horror has had a place in storytelling from very early on, if not from the very beginning, with stories such as the epic of *Gilgamesh* containing heroes' confrontations with monsters like the terrifying Humbaba in the 18th century BCE.<sup>1</sup> The creation of film in the late 19th century ushered in a new medium for storytelling. Film has brought about a rich, complex form of horror that combines narrative, visual, auditory, and musical elements in order to elicit a good scare.

Similar to storytelling at large, it is almost impossible to separate the beginning of film and the beginning of horror film. Film as a medium became available in the 1880s, and began to be used for commercial purposes in 1895 with Woodville Latham's work, as well as that of Auguste and Louis Lumière.<sup>2</sup> The first film that can be referred to as a horror film is generally identified as the 1896 short film entitled *Le Manior du Diable*, by George Méliès,<sup>3</sup> less than one year after the release of the Lumière short films. For most intents

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<sup>1</sup> Hines, Derrek. *Gilgamesh*. 1st Anchor Books ed. New York: Anchor, 2004. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, Joylon and Plate, S. Brent. *The Religion and Film Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Marsh, Clive., and Ortiz, Gaye Williams. *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. Print.

and purposes, as long as film has been present as an art form, horror film has been as well. This is a fact that is widely overlooked in academic discussions of film as art, as the genre of horror is regularly regarded as purely surface level entertainment. In fact, pop culture has been maligned as less useful in academic conversations than fine art.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that no serious scholarship has been done on horror film, as the field of film studies has been firmly established within American academia. In fact, the field of film and religion has also been developing rapidly in the previous twenty to thirty years, with the *Journal of Religion and Film* beginning in 1997, and a multitude of sub-field defining books having been published since 1990. The work of authors from backgrounds including theology, religious studies, film studies, and the social sciences has been developing the discourse of the field, but there is still much to be done in determining how film and religion come into contact.

Film from around the world incorporates countless references, allusions, and inclusion of religious imagery and narrative elements from a myriad of religious backgrounds. Whether it is Japanese director Akira Kurosawa featuring the Buddha image of Amitābha in his 1985 war epic *Rān*, British-Iranian director Babak Anvari featuring djinn in his 2016 horror film *Under The Shadow*, or the 2001 drama *The Devil's Backbone*, by Mexican director Guillermo del Toro being set at a Catholic Orphanage, religious imagery and plot devices are evident in the world of cinema. Beyond these explicit references, films frequently contain implicit religious themes, such as the inclusion of narrative arcs and characters similar to those of a religious origin. Far from an exception, horror films often contain an emphasis on supernatural elements taken directly from

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<sup>4</sup> Santana, Richard W., and Erickson, Gregory. *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008.

religious narrative and iconography, or vaguely applied under the simple label of “supernatural.” As horror typically depends on the presence of some sort of evil entity opposed to the protagonists, culturally relevant symbols of evil are often used in order to represent the antagonistic force in a story. Many of George Méliès’ early horror films featured the Devil in this antagonistic role, including *The House of the Devil* (1896), *The Devil in a Convent* (1899), *The Devil and the Statue* (1902), and *The Merry Frolics of Satan* (1906). Since then, his presence in horror films in general has been relatively consistent. On par with this, for horror produced, and mainly consumed, in the United States, the Devil has been a reliable and popular figure to fill this role.

It is fairly self-evident that figures such as the Devil are present in these films. Satan in particular has been such a heavily used character that for decades he has even crossed at times into the territory of trope and cliché, evident through the existence of parodies in the vein of *Repossessed* (1990), *Scary Movie 2* (2001), and *This Is The End* (2013), as for satire to exist, there must first exist themes pervasive enough to satirize. With its regular dealing in a sense of evil represented by devils or demons, some have even gone as far to call almost all modern American horror films “Christian propaganda.”<sup>5</sup> But the question remains as to how these figures and narratives are related to their religious origins. Are these elements being used in coordination with religious groups? Are they supported, condoned, or criticized by practitioners? Why is it that these elements are being used and what can this tell us about the landscape of American culture in relation to religion, specifically American Christianity?

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<sup>5</sup> Hesse, Josiah. “Why Are So Many Horror Films Christian Propaganda?” *Vice*, October 18, 2016.

Is the Devil in American horror film the same devil that resides in some Christian theology, teachings, and practices? No, and yes. Obviously, there exists a multitude of Christian groups in the United States, professing and practicing an even more abundant variety of beliefs, practices, and traditions. Many American Christians reject the popular character of the Devil. Many American Christians, particularly amongst Mainline Protestant populations, reject the notion of Satan completely, or believe that his character is the stuff of metaphor — a personification of sin and evil. For many of those who do believe in Satan as a real and living force in the world, he is often not accurately depicted in horror films. There exists an element of appropriation of iconography of the Devil's cinematic appearances. This is somewhat ironically on course for the development of the character of the Devil, as many pieces of his iconography have been picked up from deities and characters that Christians have encountered throughout the religion's history, and even before its history.<sup>6</sup> Even if the character and stories of the Devil exist in horror film mainly without explicit endorsement by Christian groups or authorities, these films can still help us in understanding how the myth of the Christian Devil is used in the secular realm of the United States.

### **Culture and Religion**

Approaching film's relationship to religion requires assessment of film's relationship with culture in a much broader context. Firstly, we must define the parameters under which we are placing religion and culture. Much of the work I am presently laying out is that of displaying the limitations that using terms like this can present to one attempting to critically examine human experience. Not only are these concepts perhaps

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<sup>6</sup> Almond, Philip C. *The Devil: A New Biography*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014.

too large and variable to define clearly to begin with, but one always begins a definition from personal experience and thus will always possibly ignore aspects of “culture” or “religion” outside of their own. Nonetheless, without talking about these categories at all, it would be far more difficult, if not impossible, to analyze these aspects of human experience. Perhaps in the future, scholars will have done away with them completely in favor of a more constructively built system. In the meantime, we will make do with what we have.

A definition which I have found fruitful has been William Doty’s definition of culture being “A hermeneutical system of interpretation as a semiotics.”<sup>7</sup> Being born of humans, perpetuated by humans, consumed by humans, and ultimately examined by humans — as what is happening now — culture is created and perpetuated out of human interpretation and re-creation, emulation, and resistance. Understanding this through a semiotic lens, we see that our interpretation of the meaning we bestow upon symbols and words we use to represent the world is how Doty sees culture. It is the taking in and reuse of symbols that creates a recognizable culture. The nature of film allows for abundant use of symbols due to the multiple media available for representation. It provides the artist a tool to present visual symbols, auditory symbols, and musical symbols, all simultaneously.

However, there are issues with this definition. Here we can already see a privilege given to western scholarship, the study of hermeneutics coming out of the field of biblical studies and thus thrusting the lens of Christianity upon it. Placing emphasis on symbols

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<sup>7</sup> Doty, William G. *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1986.

and interpretation of symbols also privileges the nature of Protestant Christianity.<sup>8</sup> By using symbols, the pursuit of a single, all-encompassing definition of culture is ultimately futile.

Similar problems arise when examining what we are referring to as “religion.” As Brent Nongbri explored in his book *Before Religion*, the term religious is difficult to meaningfully apply to systems of beliefs, practices, and knowledge that do not match up perfectly with, specifically, American Protestant models of religiosity.<sup>9</sup> What we often see in western scholarship is what I refer to as Christianity and the *isms*. There is Christianity, and then there are the systems that resemble Christianity in some form or another, but not completely. A fair portion of this model comes from Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion in his essay, “Religion as a Cultural System.” Within William Doty’s definition of culture, its roots of Geertz’s definition can be seen clearly, as Geertz relied heavily upon the idea of a “system of symbols” being the primary element within religion. Specifically, he defines religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in man by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions in an aura of factuality that the moods and motivation seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>10</sup>

While useful in many ways, this definition shares many issues with Doty’s definition of culture. Talal Asad’s critiques Geertz’s definition, identifying the issue that when looking at a system of symbols, Geertz assumes the system to be separate, or external,

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<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, Bruce. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*. (University of Chicago Press, 2003). 5.

<sup>9</sup> Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (Basic Books Inc., 1973). 90.

from social and cultural practices. This separation of personal belief and cultural relevance is indicative of what Asad points out as “parsonian theory.”<sup>11</sup>

Bruce Lincoln expresses a similar viewpoint, elaborating on the reasons why this causes issues:

Any definition that privileges one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious necessarily fails, for in so doing it normalizes some specific traditions (or tendencies therein), while simultaneously dismissing or stigmatizing others. Asad calls specific attention to the need to include both practice and discourse(...)a proper definition must therefore be polythetic and flexible, allowing for wide variations(...).<sup>12</sup>

Because of this I have chosen to look not only at the Devil in film through the lens of American Christian practices and beliefs, but also through the lens of mythological symbols (as, despite their issues, symbols are still useful, especially in a context directly examining American Christianity) and narrative. Wendy Doniger discusses how mythology contains both symbols and narratives; symbols are only specifically useful if the consumer is initiated in the meaning of that symbol, but narrative allows for more inherent meaning. However, the myth itself does not have meaning, but each unique retelling of it does. Thus, symbols help us understand the specific religious significance of the Devil to the Christian movie-going base in the United States, which is sizable. But looking into the narratives in which these symbols are present is equally important, as these films are equally as active in the secular aspects of American popular culture.

This all runs parallel to the initial separation of religion and secular culture. Much of the work that has been done on culture and religion, especially from the field of religious

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<sup>11</sup> Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). 32.

<sup>12</sup> Lincoln, Bruce. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*. (University of Chicago Press, 2003). 5.

studies, has been very much focused on how culture is affected by and affects religion, beginning with the presupposition that religion and secular culture are two separate entities. Scholars who have worked in this area of study, such as theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, attempted to dissect how Christian theology can be reckoned with “non-Christian” culture. These attempts include parsing out ways which churches can interact with culture at large, i.e. accepting it, rejecting it, trying to influence it, etc. Because of all of this work done on the convergence of Christian theology — especially American Protestantism and Catholicism — and American culture, the task at hand of investigating the role of the Devil in American film is both more clear and more diluted. On one hand, there has been a significant amount of thinking and writing done on the intersections of film and religion in the United States that one can draw on in a project like this one. On the other hand, it constructs a frame through which to view both “religion” *and* “culture” which can constrain the investigator’s vision, just as I have felt constrained in this work in describing aspects of American pop-culture. It is a problem that radiates through the study of religion. It is precisely this concept that creates the conundrum of “how” religion and culture interact. With the active definition of religion that is used at large, a separation is created; a separation defined by anthropologist Emile Durkheim in his book *On Elementary Forms of Religion*, in which he stated that there are two areas of life pertaining to religion that are “hostile and jealous of each other ... The sacred thing is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch, cannot touch with impunity.”<sup>13</sup> This concept was later touched upon (and taken up) by influential figures of the field, including Mircea Eliade

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<sup>13</sup> Durkheim, Émile, and Swain, Joseph Ward. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*. G. Allen & Unwin, 1915.

who classified the two as the *sacred* and the *profane*.<sup>14</sup> This dichotomy relies entirely upon the assumed separation, at a basic level, of the material and the spiritual. This is a viewpoint heavily influenced by Christian theology, in that the mundane is unimportant, gritty, and normal, whereas the sacred (the religious) is transcendent, pure, and special. Eliade's separation of the two is especially rooted in time and space. He claims that worship and religious practice put one into a cosmic time and space outside of the mundane time and space which we inhabit in our everyday lives.<sup>15</sup> While this separation is useful in some respects for thinking about places and practices that are the most explicit in terms of religiosity, such as a religious service or place of worship, it prevents the investigation into less overtly religious elements.

Colleen McDannell comments on this construction and its prevention of the study of what she calls “the material” in her book *Material Christianity*:

One of the reasons why the material dimension of American religious life is not taken seriously is because of how we describe the nature of religion. A dichotomy has been established between the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter, piety and commerce that constrains our ability to understand how religion works in the real world. In spite of the difficulty of defining ‘religion,’ scholars and theologians frequently accept a simple division between the sacred and the profane.<sup>16</sup>

This simple separation applies to film, as most film — especially the mass-produced film sometimes generalized as “Hollywood” — is seen to be a secular endeavor. What McDannell suggests is that we must investigate the material aspects of religious practice

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<sup>14</sup> Eliade, Mircea, and Trask, Willard R. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New ed. Harvest/HBJ Book. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New haven: Yale University Press, 1995. 4.

and belief much like we do the theological and textual. I suggest that this be taken further, beyond the term “material.” “The material” can also create a separation between the strictly conceptual, and the strictly material, say, a book versus the idea within the book. This binary reduces our ability to understand products such as film, sound, and music that exist in substrates that are neither concepts nor objects.

A possible solution to the issues that arise with the hardline separation between the religious and the secular is to alter the conception of the religion/culture and religious/secular dichotomies. Concepts as large as these applied across the entire globe cannot be explored using simple means. Looking unto common threads interlaced between these categories can help us in seeing how they affect each other and affect those consuming them.

### **Religion and Film**

It is due to the separation of the religious and the secular that much of the study of religion and film is based around answering the question of how religion and film *interact*, or how they fail to interact. Even in Tillich’s view of a possible heteronomous relationship between religion and film, it is implied that the two are separate, and even opposing forces, in which the Church perhaps assumes a role in controlling or influencing culture. Tillich does, however, flirt with the idea of merging the two worlds with what he calls the “theonomous” approach. This is the idea that film and religion are not two completely independent entities, but two entities which are attempting to comment on the same thing, what he calls the “unconditional.” The unconditional is that which cannot be represented through the material, and must rely on aesthetics (in the arts such as film) or religion to access. This is extremely reminiscent of Rudolf Otto’s conception of the *numinous*, or that

which is irrational (or at least arational) yet nonetheless undeniably felt. Even though this does bridge the gap between religion and culture, it relies heavily upon the idea of the innately sacred, calling back to Eliade's definition of the Sacred — the feeling of special space and time supposedly felt once you cross the doorway into a church, or a religious space of the like.<sup>17</sup> This notion still assumes a fundamentally (and frankly, metaphysical) separation of material objects of culture, such as film, and transcendental religion.

Emphasizing the perceived dissonance between American religion and secular film, the strategy for many Christians in the former portion of film's existence was that of avoidance. Herbert Miles wrote in 1947 that, "They [movies] are the organ of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral cancer of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ."<sup>18</sup> Obviously, this allowed for very little dialogue between the religious and the secular, except that they did not belong together. Also coming from the concept of film belonging to a secular world totally separate from religion is the idea of Christian appropriation of film. This has been a stance taken by many American Christians since the early days of film. For instance, Reverend Herbert A. Jump, a Minister of the South Congregational Church in New Britain, Connecticut wrote in 1910 on the positive possibilities of film from a Christian perspective. In response to fears surrounding "immoral" behavior that is represented in film, such as violence, sexual promiscuity, crime, and the devaluing of traditional family structure, Jump argued that even the Bible contains immoral behavior in order to discuss what moral behavior is. Citing the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:30-37, in which a man is beaten and robbed, but a passing stranger selflessly helps him to recover. Jump believes

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<sup>17</sup> Eliade, Mircea, and Trask, Willard R.

<sup>18</sup> Johnston, 43.

that film has the possibility to show such stories, even the violence and anger, only to show how to behave morally in an immoral world.<sup>19</sup> However accepting Jump and likeminded ministers may have been, film was not widely accepted in the American Christian community until much later. General avoidance and caution towards film held a firm position on American Christians until after the 1960s, creating a sharp separation between the two worlds.

In 1934, the League of Decency was formed amidst Catholic concern over the ambiguous moral messages of film. Until the 1960s, the League of Decency had a significant amount of power in the production of films, as if the committee based in New York deemed a film worthy of the grade of “C,” or condemned, it impacted the film's financial success as a large portion of Catholics would not purchase tickets. The group represented the perceived dissonance between Christianity and film to such an extent that, in 1936, Pope Pius XI wrote a letter praising its cautionary approach. The Pope wrote, “Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions; they show life under a false light; they cloud ideals, they destroy pure love, respect for marriage and affection for the family.”<sup>20</sup> This theologically authoritative support for keeping a close eye on how far film was allowed to go only deepened the apparent divide between religion and secular film.

So how then, do we look at religiosity in film without falling into the trap of affirming the existing assumptions of the separation between religion and culture? John C. Lyden describes a method attempting to utilize social and cultural studies in order to

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell and Plate, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 39.

identify ideological threads in film. Ideological threads can be found in the narratives of films, even amidst stories that do not appear religious, and can be tied back to ideologies found in religious dogmas. Not only can this be done with religious themes, but from any social, political, or other ideological school of thought, bringing together religious and secular areas of life in film. He calls this the ideological approach to studying religion and film. Lyden cites Margaret Miles as the predominant author using this method, however criticizes Miles' approach to reading films on the basis that her assertions about audience response to films are generally unfounded and projecting of her own readings of the films onto other demographics.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, similarly to the reading of religious experience, beliefs, and practices, the scholar can never know without doubt what is actually going on inside the head of the practitioner. This becomes triply dubious when looking into film and religion together. Not only does it lead to assuming, without evidence, what the thought process of a person involved in a religious scenario is, but also assuming the reading of a particular film that that person will have. Even further, the researcher can then construct how the two already constructed thought processes of the viewer interact, and determine a final, unsubstantiated construction of how the religion in the film affected the viewer.

However, while this intentional attempt to keep in mind the dangers of essentialization and assumption is incredibly important, it can also raise significant barriers to study. By attempting to avoid generalization in every fashion, one cannot dare to make any assumptions that could possibly lead to fruitful comparison. Because of this, Joel Martin suggests that a mythological approach must be used to supplement the ideological when studying film. The use of the concept of myth has been used in numerous ways in

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<sup>21</sup> Lyden, John. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. 45.

attempts to identify and relate common threads in narratives from around the world, sometimes referring to these structures as archetypes, allowing for cross-text and even cross-cultural study. One conception of myth that allows for cross-cultural comparison is that put forward by Wendy Doniger as stories that allow us to look at massive — perhaps even cosmic — problems in life that are too large to solve on a personal level, and bring them to the cosmic through cosmic sized narrative. She states that “when we take into account myths not, perhaps, from different ends of the earth’s orbit, but at least from different ends of the earth, we have made our mythical micro-telescope a bit longer than the one provided by our own cultures, and we can use it to see farther inside and also farther away.”<sup>22</sup> This use of myth can be useful in comparatively looking into how narratives which are shared in many films, produced by varying groups, could possibly be addressing similar, if not the same, unresolvable tensions of the globally shared human experience. But one must be cautious in using this conceptualization of myth, as assuming the sameness of all stories, or universal archetypes, in the general adherence to a specific and defined mythic structure reduces the intricacies and characteristic differences that make cultures and religions unique, and possibly ignores differences for the sake of the survival of the myth structure. For example, Joseph Campbell famously describes an archetypal myth in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, depicting the stages of narrative that he claims every hero figure goes through.<sup>23</sup> Campbell’s archetypal myth is useful in that it helps one to identify similarities between stories, but it gives priority to a classically European narrative structure and is dismissive of stories that differ from this storyline, often trying to present

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<sup>22</sup> Doniger, Wendy. *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth. Lectures on the History of Religions*; New Ser., No. 16. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Second ed. Bollingen Series; 17. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968.

them in ways that reshape them to fit a mold they may not actually fit.<sup>24</sup> It has, after all, been a heavily posited orientalist argument that the culture of the Other represents something that the Christian worldview describes, but simply fails to represent it as well. However, on the other hand, assuming that all stories cannot be compared at all because they come from — even slightly — different cultural moments, prevents any comparison and isolates stories and cultures. Thus, retaining both the ideological and the mythical lenses is appropriate.

When considering this topic, we must also be wary of the language used when representing an entire country, especially one with as large and diverse a landscape as that of the United States. In reality, it is impossible to use terms such as “American” when describing thoughts, ideas, dispositions, and actions due to the fact that any blanketing of these attributes would be gross essentialization. There are in fact so many cultural groups stemming from innumerable variables, that to call any one facet of American culture to be essentially “American” would be to prioritize and privilege that group as dominant, representative, or a model for what it is to be American. Having said that, there are also concepts that are evident to be dominant within *pop*-culture, especially in film. These certain facets that have been privileged and *presented* as truly “American.”

This topic is touched upon by Charles Taylor in his book, *A Secular Age*. He argues that even though the concepts of the “American spirit,” or the “American dream” are spoken of in terms of a system of values independent of religion, such as hard work and personal attributes, this system is permeated with specific religious thought. He states:

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<sup>24</sup> Lyden, 24.

If this kind of prosperity was central to the American way of life, so was religion. For it could be seen as following God’s design, and America as a nation was especially founded to realize that design. The three sides of this triangle mutually supported each other: the family was the matrix in which the young were brought up to be good citizens and believing worshippers; religion was the source of the values that animated both family and society; and the state was the realization and bulwark of the values central to both family and churches.<sup>25</sup>

As much as it is “central to the American way of life”, it is embedded in aspects of American culture, so much so that someone who does not identify with Protestant Christianity — whether they belong to another religious tradition, do not affiliate with any religion, or reject the concept of religion altogether — still does not escape the penetrating effects it has, depending on how immersed they are within traditional “American” culture. Thus, Christian ethics are presented as normative, even within “secular culture.” One example of how these effects can be transmitted through other means is the mechanism of American consumer culture. The constant stream of products and entertainment which must be chosen before being consumed both influence and perpetrate ideals which share their origins with religious concepts. Kathryn Lofton comments on this phenomenon:

The seemingly inconsequential preference of one superhero over another, the quick flip of the radio station from something you can’t stand to something you can tolerate, or the decision to record this program over something else on your DVR — these discernments may be rendered as minor matters in the given traversal of daily life, yet represent our decisions to connect with (or not) circulating objects. These small decisions are where we organize ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, as political and economic actors, in alignment with

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<sup>25</sup> Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 505.

certain demographics and social wholes and implicitly or explicitly in dissent from others. This is how we draw the lines of what a family should be and how a woman can appear; this is how we know what a working day ought to include and what racial and gendered freedoms are possible.<sup>26</sup>

Connecting back to Taylor's triangle of religious culture, these choices are influenced by the fact that the bulk of the religious sentiment in the United States is that of America's special foundation within Protestant Christianity. The values created and reinforced by this sentiment are thus presented in the form of what products are popular, including films. They are brought to the forefront without being boomerily stated.

However, this is not to be misconstrued with the assumption that because some elements come from, or are associated with Protestant ideas, they are Protestant ideas. These ideas are subject to the ebbs and flows of the American public at large, which is composed of innumerable constituent cultures and subcultures, sects, and so on. Thus, they are at the same time sculpted, eroded, and constructed by the public. As Richard Santana states in his book, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*, "The United States is the world's primary creator and exporter of popular mass culture and arguably one of the most religious countries in modern history. As a result, the coexistence of American Religion with popular culture has created a fertile yet caustic environment for new religious belief structures, new texts, and new worldviews that are uniquely American."<sup>27</sup> This phenomenon is what I argue occurs within the realm of popular film in the United States. Religious symbols and narratives from many systems of belief, practices, and traditions find their way into films. Once they are consumed by audiences and other

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<sup>26</sup> Lofton, Kathryn. *Consuming religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson. *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2008.

artists, they are altered by this “fertile and caustic environment,” being added to, taken away from, and reformed into new but similar stories.

George Lucas specifically described this as his intentional process when he was interviewed by Bill Moyers in 1999 about the religious thought that went into the making of *Star Wars*. Moyers tells Lucas when Darth Vader tempted Luke to join the dark side, he “was taken back to the story of Satan taking Christ to the mountain and offering him the kingdoms of the world, if only he [would] turn away from his mission.” When asked if this was intentional Lucas stated, “Yes, that story also has been retold. Buddha was tempted in the same way. It's all through mythology. The gods are constantly tempting. Everybody and everything.”<sup>28</sup> The intention to include elements from religious stories is not only evident, but affirmed. Lucas also agreed with Moyers when he stated that *Star Wars* may have been so popular because it provided for young people who had a “hunger for spiritual experience [that] was no longer being satisfied sufficiently by the traditional vessels of faith.” Lucas responded, “I put the Force into the movie in order to try and awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people - more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system.”<sup>29</sup> Thinking back to Santana’s description of the coexistence of religions with popular culture in the United States, there are obviously religious elements feeding into the creation of popular films. Considering *Star Wars* is one of the most popular film franchises in history, it is also evident that these religious themes and narratives were also restructured and fed back into the populous. In fact, many in the United States (and worldwide) have claimed Jediism as their religion. The Temple of the Jedi Order, according to its website, was recognized as a tax-exempt International Ministry and Public Charity

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell and Plate, 266.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 162.

by the IRS in 2015, a clear example of new religious beliefs, texts and ideas created by the fertile yet caustic environment for religion in American popular culture.

### Film as Religion

Moviegoers do not usually think of themselves as participating in religious activity when they take their seat in the movie theater or put on a movie at home. To many Americans, religion in film is sequestered to a particular genre which sets out with an explicit religious message, almost exclusively Christian in nature. Of these films, there are mainly two types. First, films that retell biblical narratives. These often take the form of children's movies such as DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), which depicts the events of *Exodus*, and biblical epics, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Second are films which depict modern American Christians facing modern American life, such as *Facing the Giants* (2006) and *Breakthrough* (2019). Outside of this, film is generally considered to be one of the more secular pastimes one can indulge in.

However, as displayed earlier, the dividing line between religious and secular is not so easily distinguishable. The same is true for film. Because it exists within a market and social space, film as an art form is virtually indistinguishable from film as a product and social activity. By proclaiming our approval and enjoyment of a film we attach ourselves, knowingly or unknowingly, to its aesthetics, ideals, morals, and message. While it is still a luxury with certain groups unable to access it, the cinema is a relatively universal aspect of American culture that serves as somewhat of a hub for Americans to whirl around, even if the setting has changed from trips to the movie theater to streaming from the comfort of your own home. Because one can control what movies they see, this gives an aspect they can control *and* display about their personality and identity. They self-report on what they

love and what they hate, what they want and what they resist, what they worship and what they despise. In a certain respect, we choose our gods and our demons and proclaim them to the public by wearing *Captain America's* shield on our t-shirts and putting *The Exorcist* posters on our walls.

Thus, in a country where Christian ethics, imagery, and language are tightly interwoven into the fabric of national identity, what better costume design for the ultimate demon than red skin, horns, and a pitchfork? One of the Devil's roles has always been that of a scapegoat, a face onto which a people, person, or culture can thrust their hatreds, fears, and problems. The Devil represents the "Other," be it a real group other than one's own or a metaphorical representation of an ideal outside of one's own mortality and aspirations. Collectively, through the production, marketing, consumption, and reporting on said consumption, we engage in a cycle that formulates our many Devils. The Devil is often a figure of the masses, and with such a rich history of artwork and folktale depicting him, thus there is hardly a more readily available demon to fear and conquer in film. The Devil's character is versatile, used by different films to different ends, just as myths do not necessarily have inherent meaning, but are given meaning in their retellings, and the context in which they are retold.

While it is relatively undeniable that there are elements of Satan within American film, both visual and narrative, it is less clear to what extent this figure represents the Devil present in American Christianity. In order to see how related these two devils are, we must identify the American Devil.

## The American Devil

The concept of the Devil has gone through many transformations and stages in its development. The continuing development of this character applies to numerous factors, including its appearance, attributes, presence, and namesake. The Devil, Satan, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, Old Scratch, Old Horny, and Old Jack are only some of the more famous aliases that this character goes by. In the contemporary United States, these names have become more or less synonymous, although they stem from different origins. Satan, coming from the Hebrew *sāṭān*, or “adversary,” is a character— or two differing characters — referred to in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.<sup>30</sup> This character is an entity which is at least somewhat subservient to God and meant to tempt humans towards sin. Lucifer is a Latin term meaning “light-bringer” stemming from the King James Bible translation of the Hebrew *hēylēl*, meaning “morning star” in Isaiah 14:12. Many translations and versions of the Christian Bible use differing terms for this, such as the English “morning star.” Devil is a term that originates from the Greek *diábolos*, meaning “slanderer.” As Jeffery Burton Russel indicates, the term “Devil” is somewhat ambiguous as it is used across many cultural landscapes. It can also become somewhat confusing as the term “Devils” is sometimes applied even in Christian theology as relatively synonymous with “Demons.” The term “The Devil” in Christian thought implies the importance of Satan as chief of demons and adversary of God. Although there may be many devils, he is *the* devil with which one should be concerned. Because of this, in the present work I will mostly use the term “Satan” to refer to the character in the Hebrew

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<sup>30</sup> Meeks, Wayne A., and Bassler, Jouette M. *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. First ed. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993. 692.

Bible and the New Testament (specifying when which is which), and “the Devil” to refer to the character and concept as a whole. “Satan” is the most historically and philologically precise for much of Christian thought, and “the Devil” has arguably become equally as colloquial in the United States. In addition, “Satan” has also come to be associated with LaVeyan Satanism, a religious group which was founded in the United States in 1966.

Another nuance in the concept of the Devil is its agency. Is it a person, or a spirit? What sex, if any (or any in particular), does this entity hold? “It” does not do justice to the personal aspect of the Devil, as an essential aspect of the character is the personification of Evil. “They” is grammatically and conceptually confusing, implicating plurality. “He/She” is messy and tends to overcomplicate the statement in which the Devil is involved. In addition to this, while the Devil has been represented in many forms throughout the character’s development including male, female, somewhere in between, and sexless, the character has been overwhelmingly represented as male. Because of this, and for the sake of simplicity, I will be referring to the Devil as “he” in the present work.

Within contemporary American Christianity, the diversity in the way the Devil is interpreted is wide. It is helpful to investigate the denominational separations that exist within the Country, as this often can provide insights into separations in interpretation. However, as discussed earlier, the generalization of beliefs held by a particular group is useful only to the effect that it helps to gain a broad understanding, while at the same time understanding no researcher can say with certainty if there is cohesion within that group. Through the self-reporting of 173,229 participants in 2017, 48.9% of the population polled identified as some form of Protestant or non-Catholic Christian. 23.0% identified as

American Catholic.<sup>31</sup> Within those, there is an entire spectrum of fundamentalist (biblical literalist), and non-literalist interpretation. As one might expect, belief in the Devil is highly variant within these groups.

#### American belief in the Devil

In his book, *That Old Time Religion in Modern America*, D. G. Hart posits the Scopes Trial of 1925 was an identifiable turning point at which biblical literalism in the American Protestant population began to decline. Even though the trial ruled in favor of prosecuting John Scopes for the teaching of Evolution in public school, the argument of the defense that if following the Bible meant a fundamental rejection of scientific advances, then, as Hart puts it, “biblical faith would have to be modified.”<sup>32</sup> That is not to say that American Protestantism’s literal interpretation of the Bible has completely disappeared, but this initiated a shift away from the Bible being the cosmological and literal foundation of the religious majority’s worldview, to being primarily an ideological and moral foundation. This is a shift that would presumably include the role of Satan as a conscious devious actor with agency that presently lurks in the world.

Jeffery Burton Russell asserts that this shift is what he calls a “liberal protestant” movement towards combining biblical criticism and theology in order to “demythologize” Christianity. Citing Mircea Eliade, Russell takes on a more cosmological meaning of the word “myth,” and I think a term that would possibly be more fruitful in this situation is “detranscendentalise”. If we take a more narrative approach to the concept of myth, such as that of Wendy Doniger or Peter Lyden, we will see how mainstream American

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<sup>31</sup> Newport, Frank. “An Update on Americans and Religion”. *Gallup*, December 22, 2017.

<sup>32</sup>Hart, D. G. *That Old-time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*. American Ways Series. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002. 26.

Protestantism was able to retain the narrative importance of the myths within the Bible — including myths involving Satan — Russell continues to argue that more traditional or fundamentalist Protestants tend to refer back to the Reformation ideals of gaining knowledge from the Bible, considered ineffable, and therefore are more likely to affirm the physical and/or spiritual existence of Satan.<sup>33</sup> Public Catholic dialogue surrounding the Devil has decreased over the years, but authority figures still affirm the reality of a real Devil in the world, for example, Pope Francis’s publishing in 2019 of *Rebuking The Devil*. However, Church authorities proclaiming official theology does not mean that every practitioner will adhere to specific beliefs. Nonetheless, the affirmation of the Devil by none other than the Pope, makes it evident that catholic belief in the Devil is, at least in some form, very much alive.

### The Popular Devil

The Devil as a figure often manifests in the minds of lay practitioners. “Theologians and thinkers have never been the Devil’s main constituency. He is a popular figure, not a dogmatic abstraction, and has come alive not in learned tomes or seminary debates, but in the minds of the faithful, terrifying, omnipresent, and grotesque, evil incarnate.”<sup>34</sup> What Peter Stanford is saying here is that even though the theological aspects of the Devil are responsible for much of his attributes, the stories, narratives, and fears surrounding him are fleshed out by the Christian public at large. Despite this, there is a relatively common thought amongst scholars that belief in the Devil has dropped off significantly in the last

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<sup>33</sup> Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. 259.

<sup>34</sup> Stanford, Peter. *The Devil: A Biography*. New York: H. Holt, 1996. 95.

300 years or so.<sup>35</sup> This is usually rationalized in the statement that churches and doctrine do not profess the presence of, and overriding fear in, the Devil today. While this is not completely true, theologians and church authorities usually spend far more time considering the presence and reality of Christ and God. Satan on the other hand, has always been a boogeyman of the public. Present in the consciousness of people who walk home from work in the night and look over their shoulder because their hairs are all standing up on end. The evidence for thought surrounding the devil has come heavily from artifacts we have that find their origin in the arts. In paintings such as Goya's *Witches' Sabbath* in 1798, and writing such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1667, the devil enjoys the life of a celebrity in the veins of literature, visual art, and music, and this is still true today. We cannot ascribe belief in the Devil to the peoples of history by looking at their art while writing off the presence of the Devil in our own art as imaginary and abstract. As Peter Stanford describes, "we may go see films about vampires, but we don't necessarily believe in them. It would be arrogant to judge those who lived in the medieval age any less sophisticated. People may have listened and repeated what they heard in the pulpit, but how far did they believe it to be true?"<sup>36</sup> Thus, just because the Devil is a popular character in film today, this does not mean that belief in a real Devil is equally widespread.

Obviously, the everyday beliefs and practices of the practitioners of a religion do not identically reflect the doctrines, dogmas, and canon laid out by the central or even the peripheral authority of that religious tradition. On the other hand, the beliefs and practices of the practitioners also do not perfectly mirror the art and literature made by the populace. *Is there an actual body of beliefs somewhere in the balance?* There tends to be, especially

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<sup>35</sup> Almond, Chapter 5; Russell Chapter 1; Stanford Chapters 1 and 6.

<sup>36</sup> Stanford, 107.

in popular rhetoric and dialogue, the idea that a religion can “say” something, or have a “viewpoint,” as if it is a living, breathing entity. However we must remember that the set of cultural factors, practices, beliefs, cosmologies, and language that makes up what we call “religions” are *massive* sets of factors, all informing said “religion,” and there is not a central dogma of any group occupied by more than one person - and sometimes not even within a congregation of one.

Because the Devil is such a significant figure not only in official theology and church dogma, but also in the popular mind, he has played a massive role in art. Myths portray and are often referred to by the names of the heroes within them, thus we tend to forget that in virtually every myth there is the Other, the manifestation of what the hero is fighting, the evil to conquer. Thus, in most popular stories that portray a good hero to emulate, there is also the evil villain to hate. These characters survive together, bound intrinsically by their opposing but codependent nature. So is the Devil, having assumed the mantle of eternal scapegoat and adversary, in many stories that displays the triumph of Christian good over evil. Because there is a way that one should be, portrayed by these stories, there creates a vacuum of what one shouldn't be — a vacuum that, in the Christian world, is filled by the Devil. Italian poet Arturo Graf argues that devils and demons have been used to fill whatever gap they are needed in, stating, “Very often the devils, who generally possessed one human form, would assume another — also human, but better adapted to their need.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout the history of the Church we see theological ideas as well as myth being portrayed in art including images, literature, and music. Even if belief in an actual Devil is not incredibly widespread — even though there are many who do

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<sup>37</sup> Graf, Arturo. *Art of the Devil. Temporis Collection*. New York: Parkstone International, 2012. 47.

believe in a real Devil — he is alive in stories, narratives and symbols that reflect on the morals and interests of American culture — both secular and religious.

## **The Devil in the American Horror Film**

### Satanic Narratives

As touched on before, I see three main instances of religion in American film. The first is the confessional, made by self-identifying practitioners to convey a specific religious message, of which, few are made about the Devil. Second is the explicit. This is when a film includes explicitly religious symbols and narrative elements. For the Devil, this is often in the form of the character specifically being called the Devil (or any of his many aliases), or his character being battled by an explicitly religious good character, such as a priest, nun, etc. The third is the implicit. Implicit instances of the Devil include characters that exhibit traits of the Devil, possibly physically or within the narrative, without specifically being identified as the literal Devil.

Satanic narrative is expressed in a variety of ways in the American horror film. However, like other religious figures in film at large, The Devil's character tends to follow one of a few specific narratives (mythologists would describe them as archetypes). A plot device often exhibited in film is the Christ-like character. Such a character may not be explicitly referenced as a Christ figure, but exemplifies multiple traits that liken them to the Christ archetype. These traits include a mysterious origin, the attraction of disciples, a commitment to justice, conflict with authority figures, the suffering of the character for the sake of others, death or the appearance of death, and resurrection or reawakening.<sup>38</sup> These

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<sup>38</sup> Porter, Adam L. "Satan in the Movies." *Journal of Religion and Film* 17 (2013), 1.

characters are often easily recognizable (sometimes to the point of farcicality) due to the fact that the Christ-figure has much more specific plot points and characteristics thanks to the Gospels of the New Testament being mostly devoted to Jesus's development and dispositional description. Satan, on the other hand, does not enjoy the same development as Jesus within the Bible itself, despite some form of his character being present in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Despite this lack of scriptural content for Satan in the Christian Bible, Satan-like characters also play a large role in American cinema.

Carrol Fry suggests that satanic films mostly follow one of four basic narratives.<sup>39</sup> The first is the defense against the Satan character entering the world through a portal of some type. For this narrative, Fry cites movies such as *The Sentinel* (1977), *The Fog* (1980), and *Prince of Darkness* (1987). A great example of this narrative motif is *Satan's School for Girls* (1973), in which the Devil manifests as a professor at an arts college in Salem, Massachusetts. After getting close to the students he convinces them to become his "witches," and self-immolate in the basement of the school. When burning, the basement quite obviously becomes a portal to hell, as the flames appear to cover every wall, creating the appearance of a landscape made completely of fire. Satan then walks into the room, where there would have simply been the back wall, but disappears into the flames and does not reappear the way he left.

Second is the threat of the antichrist coming into the world and a satanic cult of some sort guiding him. This narrative subgenre can be exemplified well by two of the most successful Satanic horror films: *Rosemary's Baby* (1969) and *The Omen* (1977). In the former, a satanic cult manipulates a young woman, Rosemary, into giving birth to the

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<sup>39</sup>Fry, Carrol. "We Are Legion': Primal Dreams and Screams in the Satanic Screen." *Journal of Religion and Film* 19 (2015)

antichrist. In the latter, a prolific politician is tricked into adopting the antichrist as a newborn and raising it as his own. Here we can see the direct influence from Revelation with the deception of humanity<sup>40</sup> (Along with some misquoted scripture). Although I agree With Fry in the existence of the antichrist subgenre, and agree that the antichrist is aided by some form of satanic cult in these films, combining the cult narrative and the antichrist narrative ignores the fact that the cult subgenre by itself has grown much larger after the satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s, when several large profile accusations of cult activity and satanic ritual abuse in the United States were made.

Third is the possession narrative. This narrative has undergone an interesting evolution throughout its life in modern American horror and came into the mainstream film scene in an explosive way with *The Exorcist* (1973). *The Exorcist* is a possession story that is saturated in non-diluted Christian imagery. The story begins with a scene depicting an archeological dig in Iraq of an ancient temple. Eventually the camera finds its way onto a statue of Pazuzu, a figure who is a king of demons in ancient Mesopotamian religion, who eventually goes on to possess a young girl, Reagan, in the film. The Pazuzu statue shown in the film depicts a humanoid figure that is a hybridization of human and animal. This “bestial” hybridization of the Devil is present in much of Christian iconography and is one of two ways that the Devil is typically represented in American film.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the exorcism performed in the movie is explicitly displayed as a Catholic exorcism.

After the commercial and critical success of *The Exorcist*, hundreds of American horror films have been made about Satanic and demonic possession, resulting in box-office

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<sup>40</sup> *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, 2090.

<sup>41</sup> The other form the Devil often takes is that of the handsome, well dressed, and sharp young man or woman, discussed later.

hits like *Prince of Darkness*, *The Evil Dead* (1981), and many more. The genre is still popular today, as exemplified by the *Paranormal Activity* series which has been running from 2007 until the present and has its seventh title announced to premiere in 2021.

Finally, Fry identifies the Faust narrative as the fourth sub-genre of Satanic film. The Faust story is a German folktale which eventually was adapted into film in 1926 by F. W. Murnau, out of Goethe's theatrical retelling. She states that the Faust narrative is made up of four main components: The Faust/Mephistopheles (Satan) relationship, the pact ritual, the presence of magic aiding the Faust character, and the relationship between Faust and Marguerite (Faust's lover). An example of this would be *The Devil's Advocate* (2001) in which a young attorney is employed for a healthy salary and the promise of a career. He slowly realizes that his employer is the Satan himself. Played by Robert DeNiro, Satan presents as a suave, smooth talking, handsome man who does his meddling indirectly, through a bureaucratic process.

Fry is correct in identifying these as common motifs in Satanic film. However, categorizing these as distinct categories of the genre is an oversimplification, as all of these films — both those which she used as examples herself, and those which she didn't — feature more than one of these four narrative motifs. For example, *Rosemary's Baby* is a picture-perfect example of a Satanic Cult attempting to bring the antichrist into the world in order to begin a new era. At the same time, Rosemary's husband, Guy, makes a pact with the Devil through the cult in order to ensure success in his career in acting. The superior actor who has beaten him out for a role suddenly goes blind, and Guy receives his end of the bargain. Again, in *Satan's School for Girls*, the Devil creates a portal which must be destroyed by the protagonist of the story. However, the devil once again presents

as a suave, handsome, smooth talking man, mixing in elements of the Faustian Devil. Clearly, the genre cannot be neatly divided into the four categories presented by Fry, but she does give us common themes to identify in Satanic film.

### Satanic Iconography

As the Devil ends up filling many narrative roles in these films, he is presented with varying visual traits as well. This in large part is for the same reason there are so many narrative stereotypes for the Devil in film: the availability of images and other visual artwork containing representations of the Devil is extensive. Just as Graf stated, the Devil is available to fill whatever representative role he is needed in, and this is especially true in a visual sense. As Christianity spread, it encountered various other systems of beliefs, systems, and practices. When confronted with these differing systems, the image of the Devil could be adapted in order to, quite literally, demonize local deities. In some cases, as a conversion tactic, the antagonistic figures in local religion would be represented as Satan. Peter Stanford argues that Christians encountered native religion in Northern Europe, natural spirits — which the Christians would come to call Pagan spirits — were appropriated as either deceptive manifestations of Satan, or as misinterpretations of God. This is one possible way that Satan became associated with the form of an animal, or an animal-human hybrid, as he is often portrayed in art.<sup>42</sup> Artwork such as Sixteenth Century German paintings portray the Devil with the head of a bull or goat. This beast-like devil can be seen in a large portion of horror films including visual representation of the Devil. In *The Witch* (2014), the Devil is represented throughout most of the film as a black male

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<sup>42</sup> Muchembled, Robert. *A History of the Devil: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003. 48.

goat. At the end, he transforms into his human form briefly. Amidst this transformation, a shot of his legs as he walks across the room shows one human leg and one leg which remains that of a goat. In *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (2014), the Devil is shown as a shadowy silhouette with long upright horns.

Another possible origin for Devils that can be seen on-screen may be the motif of the Devil as reptilian. In the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation describes a dragon with seven heads and ten horns which plays a major role in the end of the world. *Paradise Lost* describes original sin as a modified version of that in Genesis, Eve being convinced by Satan, appearing in the form of a Serpent, to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. This description has been depicted in artwork many times, one of the most notable examples being William Blake's *Temptation and Fall of Eve*, painted in 1808, depicting Satan as a dragon-like serpent. In *Rosemary's Baby*, Satan is depicted as a man with reptilian claws, scales, and eyes. Similarly, in the possession film *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014) — a good example of a film with a Satan-like character that is never explicitly identified as the Devil — Deborah Laurence is possessed, eventually leading her to turn into a snake-human hybrid, attempting to swallow a child whole in the climactic reveal of her new identity.

### Horror Film as Myth

Russell points out that most everybody familiar with Christian myth *knows* that the serpent in the garden of Eden was really the Devil attempting to seduce man into sin through Eve, and everybody *knows* that it was with an apple that he did this. However, these details of the story are inventions of Milton, first showing up in *Paradise Lost*. The extent to which assumptions such as this have altered general perception of religious

narrative is impossible to know. But as knowledge like the apple as the fruit and Satan as the serpent are passed on culturally, largely by pop culture, it feeds back into narratives being retold. Doniger argues that myths are a way of offering a fictitious solution to a problem that may not have any easy solution in our day to day lives. Once the solution is found in a mythic story, we can carry that solution throughout our lives as an ideal. If we combine this idea with the feedback loop of narratives and stories like the examples in the myth of original sin, and the serpent becomes Satan, people discover an enemy to blame for misfortune, and carry this over to the unsolvable mystery of misfortune and evil in everyday life. As Doniger says, “Myths form a bridge between the terrifying abyss of cosmological ignorance and our comfortable familiarity with our recurrent, if tormenting, human problems.”<sup>43</sup>

Within the narrative of original sin, we can also see one of the Devil’s mythical two-way personalities. Because most of the meaning in the myth comes from its retelling, the way this myth is framed is important to the character of the Devil. This is what Doniger describes as the “multiple voices” of a myth, that when looked at together, formulate a macromyth. It is often interpreted and retold that Eve succumbed to the temptation of Evil, via Milton’s insertion of Satan as the serpent. Yet, there exists an entire school of thought centered around the retelling of this myth focusing on the Devil allowing Eve the freedom to access Knowledge. A horror film that uses this retelling of the Devil’s character is *The Witch*. The Devil’s character in this film is used to reject traditional gender roles and expectations placed on women in Christian societies. Claiming the Devil as an ally in this rejection, satanic imagery is used to represent rebellion. Female nudity, which is

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<sup>43</sup> Doniger, 22.

traditionally used in artwork, especially Renaissance paintings depicting the witches' sabbath, and the narrative retelling of the myth of original sin work in tandem to display a rejection of the structurally patriarchal Puritan society from which the main character, Thomasin, departs. This narrative is echoed in the works of feminists from the 18th century to the contemporary moment. As Per Faxneld argues in his book, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, to some female thinkers, a closeness to Satan represents a departure from inherently oppressive Christian thought. He writes on *The Woman's Bible*, a Theosophist and feminist text which refers to the befriending of the serpent in Genesis 3, often seen as Satan incarnate (due to Milton's retelling of the myth):

In short, the myth of the Fall was identified as a powerful anti-feminist legitimating device, which needed to be dealt with. Just like Blavatsky, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and some of the other women involved, saw institutionalized Christianity in general as an obstacle to progress (spiritual and feminist, respectively). Consequently, it had to be blown to bits. Making a friend of the serpent and, in the case of Stanton et al., a heroine of Eve, was to a great extent, I would argue, a maneuver to help facilitate this act of demolition by creating a subversive counter-myth.<sup>44</sup>

Thomasin escapes a family situation where her position as a young woman invites blame for much that is not her fault, including accusations of witchcraft when her father fails to reap a sufficient crop to maintain the family. Eventually, Thomasin escapes into the Devil's care, removes her clothing, and does become a witch.

We can view the evolution of the Devil as a myth that has been developing for centuries and has simply made its way into the medium of film — and that the horrifying

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<sup>44</sup> Faxneld, Per. *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017, Chapter 4.

reality of everyday problems dictates that horror is a fitting home for this character. For example, in *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, the antagonist of the film is a young girl who ends up murdering five people after being manipulated by the Devil. This film takes a very concrete problem, that of the fact that murderers and serial killers exist, and places it on a mythic scale, identifying the motive for seemingly senseless crimes to be the unholy personification of Evil that is Satan. The multitude of Satan-like characters and narratives can at once be retellings — different voices — of the same mythic character and ideological portrayals of societal issues and institutions.

In either case, this is sometimes done intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. Sometimes explicitly, and sometimes more subtly. George Lucas once again provides us with insight into his film making process, this time specifically on how Satan was present in his mind in the filming of *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999). Commenting on Darth Maul, a powerful evil antagonist, Bill Moyers told Lucas, “When I saw him, I thought of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* or the Devil in Dante’s *Inferno*. He’s the Evil Other - but with powerful human traits.” Lucas responded, saying, “Yes, I was trying to find somebody who could compete with Darth Vader, who is now one of the most famous evil characters. So we went back into representations of evil. Not only the Christian, but also Hindu and other religious icons, as well as the monsters in Greek Mythology.”<sup>45</sup> Even though nobody who has ever seen *The Phantom Menace* would classify it as being anywhere near a horror film, it displays a Hollywood director’s intentional inclusion of ideological character and Satanic myth into a mainstream film, through an implicitly

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<sup>45</sup> Mitchell and Plate, 261.

Satanic Character. This demonstrates how religion, myth, and the secular world of film are not as separate as they are often thought to be.

### **Conclusion: Moving Forward**

Despite the claims — and perhaps hopes — of some, the popularity of the Devil in the American horror film has not waned. The ongoing success of possession films such as *The Nun* (2018), *Demonic* (2015), and numerous others displays this. Not only have many individual films been produced and achieved success, many series have continued these successes for years, such as the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007-present) and the *Conjuring* series (2013-present). As horror films continue to be made, religious iconography will continue to play a role within them. The Devil will continue to make cameos in these films, as he has for as long as horror films have existed, beginning with George Melies's *Le Manior du Diable*. The question of if these religious narratives and iconography in films are *actually* religious narratives and iconography quickly becomes messy, and dances on the border of the unanswerable. Instead, we should look at how these mythic and ideological narratives and iconography dance between authoritative religious establishments, practitioners, the silver screen, and American culture at large. In terms of the Devil, we can see how the various ways he is presented allows for a multitude of voices to draw from the vast pool of significance that his character holds. From the fundamentalist Evangelical to the self-proclaimed Satanist, or even Jedi, the story of the Devil has much to offer all aspects of American culture. Not only is this useful pertaining to this specific figure, but this path can take us far beyond the role of the Devil — or any Christian concept for that matter — and into the rest of the world, and the rest of life.

Setting aside a rigid distinction between the religious and the secular may assist us in finding important details in the everyday lives of people, both in specific cultural contexts, and cross-culturally. Using film as myth, or to be more precise, the retelling of myth, we can easily go beyond the Christian and the American worlds. Looking at the retelling of different myths within their own cultures as well as cultures that adopt and retell them, we can understand how these stories interface with the culture that produces or retells them, and how this connects cultures around the globe. There does not have to be a single archetype for myth, or a single way ideology is portrayed, but identifying narratives and iconography in popular art can bring us closer to understanding these stories and their place in the lives of all people.

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