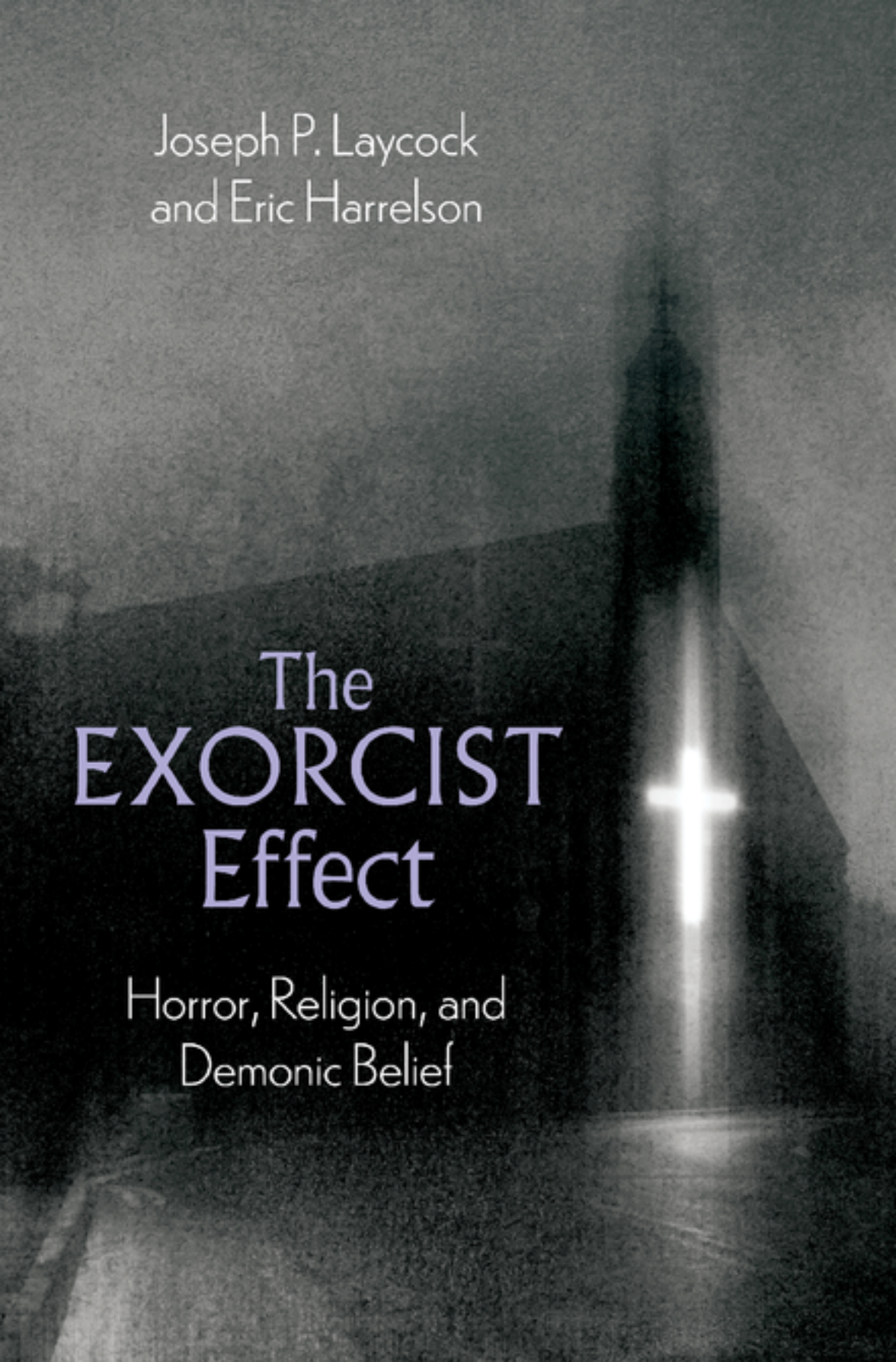
Joseph P. Laycock
and Eric Harrelson

The EXORCIST Effect

Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief



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Contents

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1

The Exorcist Effect

"It is thanks to movies that we find a renewed interest in exorcisms."
—Father Gabriele Amorth, founder of the International Association of Exorcists.[1]

"Religion, for better or worse, is vastly more like a film than an intellectual proposition."
—S. Brent Plate[2]

On March 4, 1990, Cardinal John O'Connor made headlines when he told reporters that two exorcisms had been approved in the last year in the archdiocese of New York. The announcement followed a Sunday sermon given in St. Patrick's Cathedral on Matthew 4:1–25, wherein Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. During the sermon, O'Connor read passages from William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist*, which he described as "gruesomely realistic." While acknowledging that *The Exorcist* is fiction, he pointed out that the story is a distillation of accounts of actual demonic possession. O'Connor went on to warn that Satanic worship was increasing, including black masses and "cults" such as the Manson family. "Diabolically instigated violence," such as abortion and divorce, were also on the rise. Furthermore, a key factor driving this trend was heavy metal music, which he denounced as "pornography in sound." This music was not only distasteful but could lead to suicide and demonic possession, especially the song "Suicide Solution" by Ozzy Osbourne. Osbourne's song had been the subject of a 1986 lawsuit in which parents alleged the song's gloomy lyrics drove their nineteen-year-old son to suicide. Osbourne retaliated in a statement addressed to O'Connor, telling him, "You have also insulted the intelligence of rock fans all over the world, and I recommend you do a little more research before making your opinions public in the future."[3] The sermon and its aftermath were covered

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by *Time* magazine, *The Washington Post*, and United Press International, and it sparked a wave of media interest in Catholic exorcism.

Journalists seeking commentary reached out to James LeBar, a Catholic chaplain at the Hudson Valley Psychiatric Center in Poughkeepsie, New York. In addition to being an advocate for exorcism, LeBar was active in the counter-cult movement, an area traditionally dominated by evangelicals. In 1988, he appeared on Geraldo Rivera's notorious "investigative report," *Devil Worship*: *Exposing Satan's Underground*. Moving to capitalize on the sermon, ABC's *20/20* (and then *Nightline*) tapped LeBar for a show idea in which an authentic Catholic exorcism would be shown on national television. With LeBar's help, they located a sixteen-year-old girl in Palm Beach, Florida, who was approved for an exorcism and whose parents agreed to have it filmed.[4] The show aired April 5, 1991, and featured LeBar prominently. Footage of the ritual was accompanied by Carmina Burana's "O Fortuna." This is a secular piece of music but viewers almost certainly associated the Latin singing with Jerry Goldsmith's "Ave Satani," which was composed for the film *The Omen* (1976). (*The Omen* won an Oscar for best original score.) LeBar went on to appear on numerous talk shows and paranormal programs about exorcism.

What can we make of this interweaving of Catholic demonology and media entertainment? In his work *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (2001), Michael Cuneo argues that Blatty's novel, and especially its 1973 film adaptation, triggered a resurgence of exorcism not only in Catholicism but in evangelical culture as well. Examining an incident when a Catholic cardinal read from a horror novel alongside the Gospel of Matthew, Cuneo asks, "Is there anything more that needs to be said regarding the symbiotic connection between religion and popular culture in contemporary America?"[5] This book begins with the assumption that, yes, there is more that needs to be said.

The Exorcist polarized Catholic leaders, with some praising it for reminding the public about the reality of the devil and others condemning it as pornography and a study in embarrassing superstition. And both conservative and liberal Catholics expressed embarrassment over the depiction of exorcism on ABC. But while some might prefer to live in a world where Church authorities are above the trends of Hollywood, chaplains in psychiatric centers do not spread rumors of Satanic cults on *Geraldo*, and cardinals do not debate song lyrics with Ozzy Osbourne—this is not the way religious cultures actually work. The line between "ecclesiastical" and "popular" expressions of religion has always been an ideal rather than a reality.[6]

Historian of American religion David Hall noted that the "lived religion" approach to religious history is about "breaking with the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion."[7] What might the religious landscape look like if we examined the relationship between horror films and actual religious beliefs and practices not as an embarrassment or an example of "religion gone wrong," but as part of the ordinary lived experience of religious people? Viewed from this approach, new questions present themselves about the relationship between religion and supernatural horror films. Why would a cardinal like John O'Connor deploy the gruesome imagery of *The Exorcist* in a Sunday sermon? Why do films have this power to shape the religious imagination? And why do the best horror films so often claim to be based on "a true story"?

The Exorcist Effect

In *The Exorcist*, when Chris MacNeil approaches Father Damien Karras about performing an exorcism, Father Karras responds, "Well, the first thing, I'd have to get them into a time machine and get them back to the sixteenth century. Well, it just doesn't happen anymore, Mrs. MacNeil, since we learned about mental illness, paranoia, schizophrenia." This was a typical North American perspective of exorcism in 1973. But exorcism never truly died in Western culture, it only waxed and waned. And in the years since 1973, belief in demonic possession and the practice of exorcism have risen steadily. In 1964, a national poll conducted by the University of California at Berkeley found that thirty-seven percent of Americans believed in Satan as a literal entity. By 1973 that number had risen to fifty percent.[8] Subsequent studies indicate this trend has only continued. Gallup polls show that the percentage of people who believe in the devil has increased from fifty-five percent in 1990 to seventy percent in 2004. In a 1998 Southern Focus Poll, fifty-nine percent of respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Do you believe that people on this Earth are sometimes possessed by the Devil?" The 2007 Baylor Religion Survey found that 53.3 percent of respondents "agreed or strongly agreed" that it is possible to be possessed. In a 2013 YouGov poll, fifty-one percent responded that they believe in demonic possession.

Churches have warmed to exorcism as well. In 1990, Father Gabriele Amorth, exorcist of the diocese of Rome—who once stated that *The Exorcist* was his favorite film—founded the International Association of Exorcists for

the purpose of training more exorcists. In 2009, the Association of Catholic Psychiatrists and Psychologists reported that, in Italy, half a million people a year undergo exorcisms.[9] The International Association of Exorcists received formal recognition from the Curia in 2014. It is now fairly common to see stories of conservative Catholic authorities performing public exorcisms to frame social issues, such as gay marriage or the toppling of monuments by leftist protestors, as demonic.[10]

The demonic has also become mainstream through "Third Wave" theology associated with the writings of C. Peter Wagner and the New Apostolic Reformation movement that has infiltrated the conservative political sphere for over a decade. As Sean McCloud observes, "Demons play *the* crucial role in the Third Wave imaginary."[11] Perhaps the starkest index of the demonic's arrival into mainstream culture was a prayer given in January 2020 by Paula White, a figure in the New Apostolic Reformation movement and chair of President Donald Trump's evangelical advisory board. In a video, White invokes a highly specific lexicon of evangelical spiritual warfare with statements such as, "We cancel every surprise from the witchcraft in the marine kingdom—any hex, any spell, any witchcraft, any spirit of control, any jezebel, anything that the enemy desires." She then went on, "In the name of Jesus, we command all Satanic pregnancies to miscarry, right now. We declare that anything that's been conceived in Satanic wombs, that it'll miscarry." It was this second statement—in which an evangelical pastor tied to the Trump administration appeared to call for abortion—that drew criticism. But most media outlets no longer found it newsworthy that someone described as the president's personal pastor claimed to be actively battling witchcraft, "jezebel" demons, and demons of "the marine kingdom."[12] Certainly this situation would have been unimaginable when Blatty wrote *The Exorcist*.

Demographic research notes that the belief in the demonic correlates with regular church attendance, low levels of income, and low levels of education. Most sociological models of contemporary demonic belief regard it as a kind of coping mechanism that explains failure and misfortune.[13] While the explosive growth of exorcism and evangelical "deliverance ministry" since 1973 was fueled by multiple social and political changes, many scholars have cited *The Exorcist* as an important catalyst in this shift, along with *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Omen* (1976), and the slew of demonic horror films that appeared in the wake of this "unholy trinity."[14] So while other sociological factors may influence belief in demonic forces, horror movies play an important role in imagining what those forces might look like.

It is difficult to understate what a phenomenon William Friedkin's adaptation of *The Exorcist* was after it was released on December 26, 1973. A *Time* article from 1974 described 8:00 a.m. screenings and lines five thousand people long. Harry Francis, manager of a theater in Los Angeles, told reporters, "I've been in this business 47 years, and I've never seen anything like it." He estimated each showing produced an average of four blackouts, six cases of vomiting, and numerous people fleeing the theater.[15] He was quoted, "My janitors are going bananas wiping up the vomit."[16] A report that appeared in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* in 1975 claimed that the film had induced in some viewers "cases of traumatic neurosis and even psychosis."[17]

Cuneo was among the first to write about the connection between *The Exorcist* phenomenon and an increased demand for exorcisms. He managed to interview two Jesuit priests who appeared in the film. As many people know, Blatty based his novel on the 1949 exorcism of a boy from Maryland. In the acknowledgements of *The Exorcist*, Blatty states, "I would also like to thank the Rev. Thomas V. Bermingham, S. J., Vice-Provincial for Formation of the New York Province of the Society of Jesus, for suggesting the subject matter of this novel."[18] Father Bermingham had been Blatty's Latin teacher in Brooklyn and later taught at Georgetown University while Blatty was a student there. In the 1960s, Blatty reached out to Bermingham for advice in writing his novel. In the film adaptation, Bermingham played the president of Georgetown University. Another Jesuit, William O'Malley, played Father Dyer who discovers Damien Karras's body at the end of the film. Both priests also received screen credits as technical advisors. In an interview with Cuneo, Bermingham, then in semi-retirement, recalled:

> Making the movie was strange enough, but the aftermath was completely bizarre . . . . I knew very little about exorcism and demonic possession prior to helping Blatty do research for his book and working on the movie, but when the movie came out, I found myself on the hot seat. People saw my face and my name on the screen, and they assumed I was the answer to their problems. For quite a while dozens of people were trying to contact me every week. And they weren't all Catholics. Some were Jewish, some Protestant, some agnostic, and they all believed that they themselves or someone close to them might be demonically possessed. These were truly desperate people, and I did my best to meet with as many of them as possible and discuss their problems. Of course, I approached these discussions

> with a great deal of skepticism . . . . I arranged psychological counseling for some people, but this was sometimes a big disappointment for them. They assumed, because of my association with the movie, that I'd be able to resolve their various difficulties with an exorcism. The funny thing is, I wouldn't have been able to do this even if they were possessed. I've never even participated in a genuine exorcism, and I certainly don't regard myself as qualified to perform one.

Father O'Malley's story was much the same:

> I was teaching at a Jesuit high school in Rochester at the time, and for a while the phone wouldn't stop ringing . . . . They called looking for an instant fix—pleading with me to expel their own demons, their kids' demons, even their cats' demons. It's not that I rule out the possibility of demonic possession. As the saying goes, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." But this movie seems to have set off some really strange vibrations.[19]

Churches and popular culture both scrambled to respond to this new demand for exorcisms. In 1976, Malachi Martin, a laicized Jesuit priest, published *Hostage to the Devil: A Documentary Report on the Possession and Exorcism of Five Living Americans*. This book was presented as a true account of actual exorcisms, even though nothing from Martin's book was ever corroborated and Blatty immediately denounced it as a fraudulent imitation of his novel. Where Blatty's novel presented exorcism as incredibly rare, Martin—who still identified as a priest—insisted it was actually quite common. Martin's work has been cited as an important factor in the revival of Catholic exorcism.[20]

In 1977, Jay Anson published *The Amityville Horror*, based on the allegedly true story of the Lutz family's attempt to live in a demon-infested house in Long Island, New York. The book sold over six million copies and the house became a pilgrimage site for those fascinated by the paranormal.[21] In 1979, Anson's book was adapted into the second-highest grossing film of the year. Father Thomas Bermingham was once again tapped as a religious consultant. The film spawned numerous sequels and remakes. Contributing to the mystique of the Amityville case were lay Catholic demonologists, Ed and Lorraine Warren, who "investigated" the house in 1976. The Warrens had been researching haunted houses since the 1950s, but in the 1970s they

rebranded themselves as demon hunters and became celebrities. When Catholic authorities turned away people seeking exorcisms, the Warrens stepped in and connected them with an exorcist. Often these exorcisms were performed by people who either were not Roman Catholic priests or were operating without the permission of their bishop.[22] Because the Warrens essentially created a backdoor to exorcism, Catholic authorities were left with less incentive to deny exorcisms: If they didn't do them, someone else would.

Journalists scrambled to speak with the Warrens following Cardinal O'Connor's 1990 exorcism sermon.[23] The Warrens claimed they had been present during the two exorcisms described by O'Connor—and that both cases had featured impressive levitation and projectile vomiting![24] The following year, the Fox Network aired a made-for-TV movie, *The Haunted*, based on demonic hauntings experienced by the Smurl family between 1974 and 1989. The Warrens not only helped the Smurls by investigating their haunting, but they also connected them with journalist Robert Curran, who adapted their story into a book and then a screen adaptation (Curran, the Smurls, and the Warrens all shared writing credits). Beginning with *The Conjuring* (2013), the Warrens' adventures have subsequently been adapted into an entire series of horror films all based on "true events."

This explosion of demonic media beginning in the 1970s coincided with the rise of the New Christian Right.[25] In 1975, Billy Graham published *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, which sold one million copies in the first ninety days.[26] In that book, Graham cited *The Exorcist* as the key example of the culture's "current cult of the demonic." Graham's interest in *The Exorcist* bordered on obsession and he was widely rumored to have stated that evil was embedded in the very celluloid of the film.[27] Paradoxically, in *Angels* he condemns films like *The Exorcist* while also calling for more people to recognize the reality of the devil and praising poll numbers showing that more people *do* believe in the devil. There is a sense that Graham was secretly pleased with the film's effect on religious culture even as he professed his contempt for it. He also related the following story:

> Some years ago I had dinner with several senators and congressmen in a dining room in the Capitol building. We began discussing the rising interest in the occult with special reference to *The Exorcist*. One of the senators, who had recently passed through a deep religious experience, said that due to his past experience with the occult, whenever he knew of a theater that was

> showing *The Exorcist* he would drive a block around it. He was afraid even to go near it. He said, "I know that both angels and demons are for real."[28]

Here the film itself—even without watching it—is a manifestation of spiritual evil and therefore evidence for Graham's moral cosmology. The fact that senators were discussing the occult dangers of this film in the capitol building shows this cosmology is as much a political reality as a religious one.

In some cases, the authors behind these films expressed remorse over the effect their work had on American culture. In 2002, Ira Levin, author of *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) (on which the 1968 film was based) told *The Los Angeles Times*, "I feel guilty that 'Rosemary's Baby' led to 'The Exorcist,' [and] 'The Omen.' A whole generation has been exposed, has more belief in Satan. I don't believe in Satan. And I feel that the strong fundamentalism we have would not be as strong if there hadn't been so many of these books . . . Of course, I didn't send back any of the royalty checks."[29] David Seltzer, who wrote the novel *The Omen* and the screenplay for the film (both were released in 1976) confessed, "I did it strictly for the money . . . I just wish I'd had this kind of success with something I personally found more meaningful . . . . I do find it horrifying to find how many people actually believe all this silliness."[30]

So, are novelists like Levin and Seltzer actually responsible for people's religious beliefs? Do movies like *The Exorcist* cause people to believe in demons? We are aware of only one experiment that sought to measure empirically whether *The Exorcist* caused people to believe in the demonic. In 1973, Gerald Heisler of the University of Missouri school of medicine set up an experiment to test the psychological effects of watching the film. Heisler put an ad in the paper that read, "Already interested in seeing *The Exorcist*? See it or another first run movie for free and earn $2.00/hour for completing anonymous questionnaires." Fifty-nine subjects between the ages of fifteen and sixty-three volunteered for Heisler's experiment. They were all given a series of standard tests to see how they scored on indexes of mental illness, including the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Heisler also designed his own seventeen-question test that he called the "Mysticism Scale." The Mysticism Scale asked questions about such topics as belief in sin and the devil. After getting this baseline data, the subjects were divided into three groups. Group 1 watched *The Exorcist*, Group 2 watched *Cinderella Liberty* (another R-rated film that came out in 1973), and Group 3 agreed to watch no films

until the study was completed. Then all subjects were re-tested immediately after watching the film, a week after watching the film, and one month after watching the film.

Group 1 actually scored slightly lower on the MMPI after watching *The Exorcist*, showing less tendency toward mental illness. However, they scored higher on the Mysticism Scale. Specifically, subjects were more likely to answer "yes" to the following questions: "I believe bad times fall on those who sin"; "I think there are some events in the world which man cannot understand"; "I feel unable to change any events in my life"; "I believe the devil actually exists"; "Black masses or other rites can often cure sufferers when physicians cannot"; and "If I have difficulty controlling my thoughts I would first want to go to a professional counselor." Significantly, Group 1's score on the mysticism scale *continued* to increase a week and then a month after watching the film, rising from an average score of 21 before watching *The Exorcist* to 26.3 to 36.5, and finally to 37.21. This effect did not occur with the other two groups. Heisler found that no one in the group increased or decreased religious service or prayer, but he concluded, "Viewing *The Exorcist* did change the audience's attitudes and beliefs."[31] He also speculated that this may have had less to do with the intrinsic properties of the film and more with the larger social phenomenon and media campaign surrounding it. Heisler was working with a small sample and some participants quit the experiment. Because of this, Group 1 shrunk from twenty-four people to eighteen to fourteen by the time the study ended. Still, Heisler's findings lend further evidence to what many historians already concluded—that *The Exorcist* affected beliefs and attitudes about the supernatural.

It should be noted that audiences do not passively absorb ideas suggested in supernatural horror novels and films. An outmoded theory of mass culture held that cinema acts like a hypodermic needle that "injects" audiences with the ideology of the filmmakers. Today there is greater recognition that movie-viewers take an active role in constructing whatever meaning they take away from a film.[32] When one author assigned undergraduates to watch *The Exorcist* their reactions ranged from stark terror, to puzzlement, to dismissive mockery. Only some of the ways audiences use these films to construct meaning inform religious beliefs and practices. We outline four such ways below.

First, horror movies can be "good to think with." They can function as what sociologist Peter Berger called a "plausibility structure" or a sociocultural context that makes ideas seem believable and imaginable.[33] As religion

scholar Christopher Partridge notes, popular culture can help people to think through theological and metaphysical issues and provide resources for constructing religious and paranormal worldviews.[34] Cardinal O'Connor's deployment of *The Exorcist* is a good example of using a horror text in this way. O'Connor did not claim the story was true, only that it was "gruesomely realistic." Here the text functions as a model for imagining actual cases of demonic possession.

Second, in some cases horror films come to be interpreted as historical events rather than fiction. This can occur in a number of ways. Audiences may simply take claims that a film is "based on a true story" at face value. Fact and fiction can also become blurred through confabulation, a type of memory error in which fictional images and narratives come to "fill in gaps" in memory, thus confusing fact and fiction. Cognitive scientists such as Jeffrey Zacks, who has written on this problem as it relates to movies, have noted that the brain is better at retaining information than the source of that information, especially over time.[35] During the Satanic Panic of the 1980s many people described "recovered memories" of Satanic ritual abuse, often while under the influence of hypnotic therapy sessions. Narratives produced through these methods, such as *Michelle Remembers* (1980), often resemble a pastiche of images borrowed from horror films.[36] Finally, conspiracy theorists may engage in what Michael Barkun called "fact-fiction reversal," claiming that fictional films are in fact a disguised truth.[37] For example, Michael York, the founder of the Nuwabian nation, claimed that the Antichrist had been born in New York in 1966 and that the film *Rosemary's Baby* was an attempt to "camouflage" actual events.[38]

Third, as we saw with Billy Graham, in some cases horror films are incorporated into a demonological worldview not as texts but as material objects. Their mere physical presence has supernatural significance. Rebecca Greenwood, a deliverance minister and a faculty member at an institute founded by C. Peter Wagner, describes the following anecdote about investigating a house where a nine-year-old girl was allegedly suffering from demonic attacks:

> I inquired if there were horror movies in the home. The mom answered, "Yes, my husband has a bookshelf of them. He watches them all the time, but Lisa [their daughter] is not allowed to." We explained that it does not matter if she is not allowed to watch them, having the movies in the home was an open door to the demonic harassment. After learning the names

> of the movies, we prayed and broke the demonic assignment of death and witchcraft off of Lisa.[39]

Here the movies serve as a kind of material anchor for Greenwood's narrative about demonic attacks. The movies do not have to be watched to invite demons and yet the *names* of the movies are needed to banish demonic influences. In a sense, the movies *are* demons and must be exorcized as such.

Finally, the narratives of horror films have a strange way of coming to life. In October 2014, Pazuzu Algarad (né John Lawson) of Clemmons, North Carolina, and his girlfriend were arrested for murdering two people and burying them in their backyard. Algarad had legally changed his name in an apparent homage to the Mesopotamian wind demon Blatty chose as the antagonist for his novel. He had also heavily tattooed his face and the walls of his home were covered in swastikas, pentagrams, and Halloween decorations. David Frankfurter describes this sort of behavior as the "mimetic performance of evil."[40] More often though, people choose to imitate the protagonists of these films. Take Bob Larson, an evangelical pastor who performs exorcisms (usually in exchange for a fixed donation to his ministry). In photographs, Larson often brandishes a large, ornate crucifix. Sometimes he also wears a black suit with a clerical collar. These are strange choices for an evangelical pastor, but they make sense if Larson is trying to resemble Max van Sydow's performance as Father Lankester Merrin in *The Exorcist*. We suggest that Algarard and Larson were both living out *The Exorcist* in a process that folklorists call ostension. Ostension, in essence, is the transmission of a legend by performing it rather than communicating it through words. As folklorist Bill Ellis puts it, "Events provoke stories, but it is far more likely that stories provoke events."[41]

This brings us to our theory of the relationship between supernatural horror and religious cultures. If events provoke stories and vice versa, then supernatural horror films are actually part of a feedback loop wherein: (1) actual events become the basis of films; (2) those films shape the way audiences interpret the world, giving rise to new beliefs and experiences; and (3) these beliefs and experiences lead to new events that become the basis of new horror films, and the cycle begins again. We call this feedback loop "*The Exorcist* effect." This is not an entirely new insight. Partridge has already referred to this relationship between popular culture and alternative spiritualities as "a hermeneutic circle."[42] However, this book uses this

theoretical framework to perform a historical survey, mapping out the intricate webs of connections between demonological beliefs and practices and their cinematic counterparts. By doing so we arrive at a new perspective on Western religious culture at the turn of the century. Furthermore, as Cardinal O'Connor's sermon demonstrates, *The Exorcis*t effect is not limited to alternative or marginalized religious practices. Increasingly, it is part of mainstream culture.

Rethinking Religion and Horror

A detailed examination of the historical connections between supernatural horror and contemporary demonology can help to inform and enrich three larger conversations: (1) "horror studies," or the critical study of the horror genre in literature and film; (2) the sociology of religion; and (3) the sociology of moral panic. For the study of horror films, attention to religious history presents a new direction that moves beyond interpreting horror either as a metaphorical discourse about social issues or through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. For religious studies, examining the influence of supernatural horror films raises challenges for theories of secularization and can lead to a more accurate and complete picture of the religious landscape. Most importantly, though, this feedback loop should be studied because the real-world beliefs and practices associated with horror—exorcism and Satanic conspiracy theories—have real world consequences as evidenced by the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1985, English professor James Twitchell gave the following summary of the state of horror studies: "The attraction of horror can be understood in essentially three ways: (1) as counterphobia or the satisfaction of overcoming objects of fear; (2) as 'the return of the repressed' or the compulsive projection of objects of sublimated desire; and (3) as part of a more complicated rite of passage from onanism to reproductive sexuality."[43] Since then, the repertoire of horror studies has expanded surprisingly little. While these approaches have their merits, a growing number of voices in religious studies have expressed frustration with the idea that these are the *only* ways horror films may be interpreted—especially when so many of these films deal directly with religious texts, beliefs, and practices.

One of the most common moves in horror studies is to claim that the success of a horror text indicates its function as a metaphorical reflection for

some social issue. Critical responses to *Jaws* (1975) are a classic example of how facile this sort of argument can be. Some critics claimed the shark was a metaphor for communism while Fidel Castro claimed it represented the threat of capitalism.[44] The suggestion that audiences were reacting to their fear of *literal sharks* was too quotidian to be taken seriously. Stephen King offers a stronger example of this approach when he argues that *The Exorcist* is a "social horror film" in which a possessed child reflects anxieties about delinquent youth in the aftermath of the 1960s. King points out that audiences in West Germany had a tepid response to the film and concludes that something specific to American culture must have caused the massive reaction to the film.[45]

The other common interpretation of *The Exorcist*—and horror films in general—is that the monster reflects some repressed psychosexual desire. The scene in which the possessed Regan seizes her mother's head, holds it to her bleeding vagina, and growls "Lick me!" certainly begs for a Freudian reading. Barbara Creed offers the following take of this scene: "Regan's transformation into devil is clearly a sexual one; it suggests that the family home, bastion of all the right virtues and laudable moral values, is built on a foundation of repressed sexual desires, including those which flow between mother and daughter."[46]

The problem with these kinds of approaches is that they all seek, as sociologist of religion Douglas Cowan puts it, "to explain eggs in terms of bacon."[47] More than half of Americans believe in the reality of the devil and demonic possession. The argument from parsimony suggests that strong audience reactions are due more to their fear of demonic possession than anxiety over their repressed sexual desires. Friedkin himself opined, "I don't think the mood of the times had anything whatsoever to do with the success of *The Exorcist*. In fact, I'm not aware of any far-reaching social problems that *The Exorcist* dealt with. That usually comes later—when people have run out of things to say about the film, they start describing the social implications of it."[48] It may be that psychoanalytical interpretations of horror were adopted early on to justify the study of horror films—a famously "ghettoized" genre—as academically rigorous and that "explaining eggs in terms of eggs" seemed unsophisticated. But to ignore the religious cultures on which these films are based impoverishes horror studies. As film historian Carlos Clarens noted, "Horror is nourished by myth, tradition and legend—all of which require centuries of rich elaboration."[49] Bible scholar Brandon Grafius argues that returning to these original narratives can revitalize the study of horror

and expand it beyond its foundations in "the triumvirate of [Noel] Carroll, [Carol] Clover, and [Barbara] Creed."[50]

Religious studies could also benefit from taking horror films seriously as a manifestation of religious culture. In 1976, Mircea Eliade pointed out the connection between popular film and occultism and queried, "But who will interpret for us the amazing success of *Rosemary's Baby?* . . . I am merely asking the question."[51] In the 1970s, movies could only be seen in theaters. With the advent of smartphones and digital streaming many modern people now live in a sea of media. Alarmingly, literary critic N. Katherine Hayles has suggested that we now think with, through, and alongside media such that media changes us just as we change it in a condition she calls "technogenesis."[52] Religious cultures are naturally affected by this media environment as well, and understanding film is increasingly important for understanding the religious landscape. Films such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) have become religious rituals with some churches screening them every Easter. Chad and Carey Hayes, the writers behind *The Conjuring* franchise, hoped that their movies would be similarly adopted for annual viewings by religious communities. This is one reason why they described their films as "religious supernatural" rather than "horror" films.[53] There has, of course, been a great deal of scholarship on how religious traditions are reflected in film, as well as how film resembles religion. John C. Lyden has argued persuasively that all genres of film share *functions* in common with religion, such as myths, morals, and rituals.[54] But supernatural horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* overlap with religion in a *substantive* way because the narratives of these films explicitly revolve around supernatural forces and the question of who believes in them.

Supernatural horror is uniquely concerned with propositions about that which William James called "an unseen order." In *Rosemary's Baby*, a woman must decide whether her kindly neighbors are witches. In *The Exorcist*, a priest-psychiatrist must decide whether a girl is demonically possessed or mentally ill. And in *The Omen* a diplomat must decide whether or not to ritually murder his son, who may be the Antichrist. Supernatural horror is really about epistemology—determining what is real and questioning what we thought was real. For this reason, supernatural horror can be read as a public conversation about the secularization narrative—the theory that as societies modernize and advance in technology, they will become less religious and faith-based institutions will have less influence. In fact, the emergence of horror as a serious genre in 1968 with the two films *Rosemary's Baby* and

Night of the Living Dead seemed to coincide with the heightened popularity of the secularization narrative.

One explanation of this connection is that films like *Rosemary's Baby* represented a "last gasp" of supernaturalism as these ideas were relegated to mere entertainment. This was the perspective of sociologist Marcello Truzzi writing in 1972 who opined, "As long as these mass phenomena represent a playful and non-serious confrontation with the supernatural elements, they then represent a possible cleansing or purging of the old fears and myths still present in our society. The more we eliminate these old fears and myths, the more we develop a naturalistic rationalism, a scientific view of the universe."[55] Truzzi's thesis became difficult to sustain one year later when audiences were fainting while watching *The Exorcist* and Catholic priests were being inundated with requests for exorcisms. Writing in 1974, Peter Berger interpreted people waiting in line to see *The Exorcist* as an act of rebellion against the banality of secularism. In Berger's view, the overbearing cultural apparatus of secularism gave the idea of supernatural evil a forbidden, titillating quality, akin to pornography: "Modern man doing magic is akin to a Puritan in a whorehouse."[56]

Sociologists now recognize that religion was not really dying in the 1970s. A more likely explanation is that modern horror took hold during a period of collective speculation about the future of supernatural belief. As Douglas Cowan writes, "Indeed, the issue is not one of *secularization*—that cinema horror discloses to us the abandonment or minimization of religious belief in late modern society—but an overwhelming *ambivalence* toward the religious traditions, beliefs, practices, and mythistories by which we are confronted, in which we are often still deeply invested, which we are distinctly unwilling to relinquish, and which we just as often only minimally understand."[57] In this sense, these movies are a public conversation about the supernatural. This makes horror films an important data point in assessing claims about secularization and should be taken seriously by scholars studying contemporary religion.

Finally, *The Exorcist* effect must be studied because many of the films examined here act as plausibility structures that support dangerous conspiracy theories. Ira Levin and David Seltzer expressed feeling "guilty" and "horrified" over cultural changes associated with their stories. While they did not state explicitly what they felt guilty about, it seems they saw a connection between demonological beliefs and demonstrable harm. Cardinal O'Connor's sermon on the combined dangers of demonic possession,

Satanic cults, and heavy metal music represented a high-water mark for a moral panic over Satanic cults. This was a period in which numerous people were wrongly accused and imprisoned for involvement in Satanic conspiracies. What then was the connection between these films and the panic?

David Frankfurter has written on how *Rosemary's Baby* helped set the stage for the panic over ritualized daycare abuse that manifested twenty years after the film. By showing how Rosemary's kindly neighbors, as well as obstetricians and other experts from the helping professions, could actually be Satanists plotting to bring about the Antichrist, Polanski's film helped audiences to imagine *what it would look like* if seemingly ordinary people were in fact part of a Satanic conspiracy. By the 1980s this became a model through which to think about conspiratorial accusations. Frankfurter writes, "What makes the process of Rosemary's awareness of Satanic conspiracy so frightening, in fact, is that the neighbors do *not* change personalities or characteristics or clothes . . . . I am reminded how, during various investigations of ritualized daycare abuse over the 1980s, the solid reputations and sociable personalities of the accused women and men altogether did nothing to exonerate them or mitigate popular condemnation: they remained *monsters*."[58]

Drew Beard, who has also written on the role of horror movies in shaping the panic, notes that throughout the 1980s these films were widely available as VHS tapes and featured in heavy rotation on both cable and network television.[59] In fact, by the 1980s, self-declared experts on "occult crime" were holding seminars for law enforcement where horror films were being *explicitly* presented as models of actual Satanic crime. Robert Hicks, a criminal justice analyst for the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, became a whistle-blower on these seminars. At a seminar on ritual crime in 1988, he watched detective Bill Lightfoot describe *Rosemary's Baby* as "an accurate depiction of Satanism of the clandestine sort." Lightfoot also cited *The Believers*, a horror film about Santeria practitioners who perform human sacrifices, as a realistic depiction of "Santeria-inspired crime."[60]

So, while horror movies did not *cause* the panic it seems that claims that might otherwise seem ludicrous were rendered more plausible to juries and law enforcement because of exposure to the tropes and narratives in these films. Jeffrey Zacks suggests that films influence the way we see the world not because we think they are real but because they become part of the apparatus our brain uses to construct models:

> It's not the case that you have one bucket into which you drop all the real-life events, another for movie events, and a third for events in novels. Remember, there is one model-building mechanism in there that grabs information from lots of different sources. The same machinery can combine what you see with what someone tells you to build a model of an event. That machinery is perfectly happy to operate on stuff from your life, from a movie, or from a book. I think that is a big part of the appeal of narrative films and books—they appeal to our model-building propensities.[61]

It is not the films themselves that lead to innocent people being convicted of Satanic crimes but rather a failure to question where our ideas about things like Satanic cults come from. Nevertheless, the harm that arises from these models is real. Frankfurter concludes his analysis:

> Motivated by a spectacle of transgression from which we cannot turn away, that is totally spellbinding in its obscenity and cruelty, we move systematically and brutally to destroy the cultists utterly, to purify the landscape of them. Lynching, burning, dismemberment, gassing, torture, drowning, exposure, cremation—these are the methods that follow when we conjure evil cults. These are the acts, I would argue, that have historically followed when a community "awakened" to some evil conspiracy.[62]

The Plot of the Book

This book is a history of the intersection of supernatural horror films with beliefs and practices related to the supernatural. Chapter 2 explores the prevailing theories through which films influence belief, including the insights of cognitive science, the theory of ostension, and theories of "veracity mechanisms" that make fictional narratives more amenable to being repurposed into religious beliefs and practices. Chapter 3 considers the legacy of the "Unholy Trinity" of films: *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen*, and examines their cultural context in the 1970s.

The next two chapters outline specific cycles in which events have inspired films that have, in turn, inspired events. Chapter 4 looks at the careers of Ed and Lorraine Warren, who rode the popular reaction to *The Exorcist*. The Warrens lent their authority to a number of alleged hauntings, inspiring several books and films about these cases. Numerous tropes of

contemporary demonology can be traced to the Warrens and, with the success of *The Conjuring* franchise, the hermeneutic cycle surrounding their legacy continues to grow and develop.

Chapter 5 looks at the strange career of Malachi Martin, author of *Hostage to the Devil*. Although the cases in this book appear to have sprung from Martin's imagination, Martin created vocabulary and models of demonic possession that are still taken seriously today. One of Martin's key disciples was New York police Sergeant Ralph Sarchie, whose book, *Beware the Night*, about the intersection of law enforcement and demonic possession became the basis of the film *Deliver Us From Evil* (2014). Sarchie's career shows that the intersection of popular culture and law enforcement is not a relic of the 1980s. Martin is currently in vogue again with a 2016 documentary about his life and a film currently in production about an exorcism he allegedly performed at an Army base.

The next three chapters consider how supernatural horror films helped to create models of the three dangers Cardinal O'Connor warned of in his 1990 sermon: demonic possession, Satanic cults, and heavy metal music. Chapter 6 considers the depiction of Satanic cults in film going back to the 1930s to show how these films influenced actual beliefs about Satanic cults as well as self-identified Satanists, such as Anton LaVey, founder of the Church of Satan. Chapter 7 examines films relating to possession, which perhaps more than any other genre, claim to be based on "true events." Chapter 8 considers a niche genre of supernatural horror films related to heavy metal. These films are significant in that they reinforce the claims of the moral panics but also satirize them. This chapter also considers the trial of the West Memphis Three in 1993, which became a public conversation about media and moral panic. The final chapter considers the role of film in the current resurgence of the Satanic Panic, particularly the QAnon conspiracy, and offers some suggestions about how the more harmful aspects of *The Exorcist* effect can be mitigated.

2

How Horror Movies Become Real

> "It's as if our imaginations have become exterior to ourselves, existing out there in our media, and our media then determines what is in our heads."
>
> —Diana Pasulka[1]

> "You can raise issues in the horror genre that you can't raise so easily in other types of films. Characters can talk about the existence of God in a horror movie, whereas in other films that would be incredibly pretentious."
>
> —Screenwriter Nicholas Kazan[2]

Oscar Wilde famously wrote that, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life."[3] *The Exorcist* effect is a möbius strip in which actual beliefs and events shape, and are in turn shaped by, horror films. One direction of this möbius strip—in which art imitates life—is undeniable. It has become *de rigueur* to advertise supernatural horror films as "based on a true story." The opposite direction—in which life imitates art—leaves more room for skepticism. Can fictional movies (sometimes with poor writing and laughable special effects) actually affect real world beliefs and practices? And if so, how is this possible?

One of the first public screenings of a film was Auguste and Louis Lumiére's *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, which was projected onto a sheet in a Paris café in 1896. It was a fifty-second reel of a train pulling into a station. Early filmmaker Georges Méliès reflected on the screening: "We were open-mouthed, dumbfounded, astonished beyond words in the face of this spectacle."[4] Newspapers reported that audiences jumped out of their chairs and fled to escape the oncoming train. But reports of a panic were almost certainly false. If you watch the Lumiére brothers' film, the camera is located on the platform, not on the tracks. So even if one *did* believe the black and white

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image were an actual train, there would be no reason to flee. Furthermore, the Lumiére brothers had begun screening films in Paris cafés in 1895, so this technology would not have been entirely unknown. The story of an audience fleeing a film of a train is a myth. The function of this myth appears to be self-congratulatory: Our naive ancestors were fooled by movies, whereas we are technologically sophisticated.

While we underestimate our ancestors' ability to discern film from reality, we overestimate our own. Modern people often assume that our ability to separate film from reality is so complete that we can become engrossed in films only if we make what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "a suspension of disbelief." Religion scholar Diana Pasulka concludes that this is just the opposite of how people actually respond to movies: "When we experience a story, our default is to accept what it tells us as true. We have to do extra work to override that default and question what we are reading. Rather than needing will to *suspend* disbelief, we have to engage in a willing *construction* of disbelief in order to keep the story world from infecting our real-world beliefs and attitudes."[5]

Anyone who has difficulty watching horror films knows what Pasulka is talking about. Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972)—an influential shock horror film inspired by Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960)—invoked the audience's need to construct disbelief with its movie poster that instructed, "To avoid fainting, keep repeating: 'It's only a movie, only a movie, only a movie . . . .'" Religion scholar Robert Orsi cites the experience of cartoonist R. Crumb, who was raised in a Catholic household in Philadelphia and described his frustration at being unable to suspend his disbelief while watching *The Exorcist:* "Remember the movie *The Exorcist*, that came out in 1973? I was completely terrified by that movie. I felt really stupid but it got to me in such a deep way that I realized that I'm not past all that Catholic crap at all. Even though I think it's stupid, it's still there." Orsi, also shaped by his Catholic upbringing, confessed he has never been able to bring himself to see the film.[6]

The train myth suggests that films "seem real" only when their technological sophistication outpaces the savvy of the audience. But technology and special effects seem to be a distraction from what is really going on when we watch films. A key example of this comes from the final scene of *Rosemary's Baby*. In Ira Levin's novel, Rosemary meets her baby for the first time and discovers it has golden eyes with vertical slits like those of a cat. Producer William Castle pondered over how they could portray this on film

and suggested ordering a live cat that they could somehow make look like a baby. But director Roman Polanski explained it was not necessary to show the baby at all, telling Castle, "If I do my job right, people will actually believe they've seen the 'baby.'" According to Castle, Polanski's trick worked, and the audience's minds simply filled in the demonic baby. Many people left the theater believing they had seen it. When the film aired on television, people trusted their memories more than their eyes and columnists reported that "due to censorship, ABC had cut scenes where the 'baby' was shown."[7]

As Michel Koven notes, "Cinema is an analogue to reality, not its replacement. And when audiences react to fantasy cinema (e.g., horror movies), they react not to a confusion of the presented image with reality but to the presentation of images as cultural discourse."[8] All audiences understand that a film of a train cannot run them over. While some horror films have been misinterpreted as "snuff films" or actual found footage of supernatural events, generally audiences know that what they are seeing is an illusion created using actors and special effects and enhanced with scary music. Koven's point is that none of this matters. As an analogue to reality, horror films still shape our ideas of *what is possible*.

A striking example of horror films changing ideas of what is possible comes from Peter Laws, a Baptist minister and host of a podcast on horror movies called "The Flicks the Church Forgot." A former atheist, Laws attributes his conversion to Christianity to watching a VHS tape of *The Exorcist*: "This film, and the thousands I watched after it, forced me to consider an utterly subversive notion: that God might be real and the church might sometimes be filed under 'solution,' not 'problem.' As a dedicated Christian-basher, this was revelatory."[9] While Laws's experience may not be typical, it raises important questions about how these films shape religious attitudes.

This chapter approaches the question of how horror films shape beliefs and attitudes from four angles. First, the genre of horror is uniquely concerned with epistemology. Perhaps more than any other genre, horror is preoccupied with challenging and playing with our conceptions of what we believe to be possible. Second, religious studies has long known that narrative has a potent ability to shape the way we understand the world. Markus Altena Davidsen has researched "fiction-based religions" such as "Jediism"—a small religious movement based on the *Star Wars* franchise. He notes that some supernatural fiction narratives possess certain qualities called "veracity mechanisms" that make them more amenable to being repurposed into religious beliefs and practices. Many of the films explored in this book contain

veracity mechanisms that give the stories significance beyond the frame of the film. Third, while audiences can easily distinguish movies from real life, there is evidence that film as a medium possesses certain qualities that facilitate confabulation, or the production of false memories, thus further blurring the story world of the film with the real world. Finally, folklorists have long noted that stories have a way of coming to life through a process known as "ostension." Ostension provides a way of thinking about situations in which horror movies provide a "script" that informs people's actions and interpretations of events in the real world.

Genre: Horror and the Revolving Door of Skepticism and Belief

When Warner Brothers studios approached screen-writers Chad and Carey Hayes about writing a ghost story, they responded that they were only interested if the film could be based on "a true story." In an interview with Diana Pasulka, Chad Hayes explained, "We purposely look for stories that are based on true events. We do that for this very reason: because people can relate. They can Google the story and see that maybe it's folklore, or it's real, but it is out there and is an experience for other people. So that contributes, no doubt, to the scare factor."[10] The ghost story the Hayes brothers wrote was *The Conjuring*, based on the adventures of Ed and Lorraine Warren. Significantly, Chad Hayes did not envision his audience passively absorbing a ghost story but rather doing active investigation—presumably either before or after viewing the film—and that this participation would enhance the scariness and, ultimately, the entertainment value of his narrative. The Hayes brothers were right. There is a lot to unpack here about the nature of the horror genre and its relationship to what we believe to be true.

As research for this book, we interviewed Grady Hendrix, who is a successful horror novelist as well as an authority on the history of the genre. Hendrix commented, "Horror is the only genre that says it's true" and cited some of the earliest examples of horror fiction. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ortranto* (1764) is widely considered to be the first gothic novel. The first edition presented itself as a manuscript printed in Naples in 1529, translated by one "William Marshal." Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) employed a similar framing device. In a move that anticipated "live-record horror films" such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), an unnamed narrator

reads a manuscript written by a governess who has died. Similarly, when folklorist Bill Ellis interviewed camp counselors about the ghost stories their teenage campers liked to hear, one counselor responded, "If you tell 'em it's not true that ruins the whole thing. You have to leave that fact that it might actually be true in there."[11]

When we explained our project of examining the connection between horror films and figures such as Ed and Lorraine Warren, Hendrix made a rather blunt observation that he and the Warrens were essentially in the same business of telling persuasive lies: "You speak with authority and you use first person and people are like, 'Why would somebody make this up?' You know?' And the reason I made it up is the same reason the Lutz's made up Amityville, it's the reason the Warrens made up all their cases, it's the reason Michelle Smith made up her cases: Money." Although the adventures of the Warrens, along with books like *The Amityville Horror* and *Michelle Remembers* are sold as non-fiction, Hendrix suggests these works are essentially horror novels that have taken the premise of "saying it's true" a bit further by perpetrating full-fledged hoaxes—the techniques of telling a horror story remain the same, the only difference is how honest the authors are. But why are these techniques (speaking with authority, using the first person, etc.) necessary at all? Why is horror alone more enjoyable (and more profitable) if it seems true? Other genres (Westerns, romantic comedies, etc.) do not benefit substantially from these kinds of complex framing devices. This is part of the larger question of why the horror genre exists at all.

David Hume's essay "Of Tragedy" (1757) was one of the first inquiries into why it is pleasurable to watch performances of tragic stories. Philosopher Noel Carroll sees Hume's question as a precursor to what he calls "the paradox of horror": Why would a normal person enjoy being frightened and watching terrible things happen to people? First, Carroll argues that horror thrives as a *narrative* form and not, as some critics would have it, a parade of *images* seeking to outdo each other in special effects or gruesomeness. Second, what drives these narratives are curiosity and discovery. Carroll writes:

> These stories, with great frequency, revolve around proving, disclosing, discovering, and confirming the existence of something that is impossible, something that defies standing conceptual schemes. It is part of such stories—contrary to our everyday beliefs about the nature of things—that such monsters exist. And as a result, audiences' expectations revolve