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It Wants to Get Inside of You: Interrogating Representations of Women in Possession Films

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ABSTRACT

*As a genre that serves to unnerve its viewers, horror often operates outside of the formal codes and narrative tropes of mainstream cinema, making it conducive to portrayals that transcend societal constructs of race, class, and gender. While numerous scholars argue that horror films offer progressive depictions of masculinity and femininity, some accuse them of perpetuating a patriarchal form by disempowering, objectifying, and punishing female characters. This thesis employed textual analysis to scrutinize depictions of femininity and its association with supernatural victimization in *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* by examining representational choices in the context of the films' cultural and historical moments and production conditions. Findings revealed that both films subvert the gender binary in their portrayals of professional, independent, and dominant women while simultaneously linking femininity to standards of submissiveness, domesticity, and vulnerability. In this way, possession films perpetuate binary norms that satisfy hegemonic understandings of femininity, as informed by patriarchy.*

Introduction

As a genre, horror primarily aims at one objective: to create a sense of fear, dread, and repulsion its viewers, often by depicting the realization of their deepest, darkest anxieties. As horror writer and director Clive Barker says of the genre, “[it] shows us that the control we believe we have is purely illusory, and that every moment we teeter on chaos and oblivion” (qtd. in Luckey). In seeking to unnerve its viewers, horror often operates outside of the formal codes and narrative tropes associated with other genres. In light of this, horror films have a unique opportunity to incorporate themes and characters that interrogate dominant societal constructs of race, class, and gender. Various scholars have regarded the genre as particularly adept at portraying characters that deviate from normative ideas of masculinity and femininity (Rieser 371). Yet, despite such progressive potential, other scholars have claimed that these films more often satisfy dominant gender norms in their portrayals of male and female characters.

In fact, countless films within the occult subgenre, namely, those revolving around possession, seem to perpetuate gender norms rather than subvert them. Most often, American possession narratives follow a male or female character as they encounter a demonic presence; ultimately, this character is possessed by the presence and a bystander must intervene to fight off the entity. Notably, there are exceptions to this formula. For instance, the entity is not always a demon; sometimes it is a vengeful or unhappy spirit. Further, the vessel that is possessed is not always human; sometimes it is an inanimate object or a place, as can be seen in the case of *Poltergeist*. However, most often, these films implement the motif of a female body possessed by a demon, often against the backdrop of a male bystander's attempts to free her from the grips of possession.

The 1973 horror classic *The Exorcist* exemplifies this motif. *The Exorcist* tells the story of a teenage girl who is possessed by a demon that purports to be the Devil. As the girl's condition worsens, her mother enlists two Catholic priests to conduct an exorcism. The film was produced by Warner Brothers and earned back \$8,157,666 of its \$8,000,000 budget in its opening weekend. Today, the film has a worldwide lifetime gross of \$441,306,145 ("The Exorcist"). The 2013 horror film *The Conjuring* also incorporates the motif of a woman possessed. The film follows paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren as they work to assist the Perron family in fighting off malevolent spirits that dwell within their Rhode Island home. Directed by James Wan, known for *Insidious* and the *Saw* franchise, *The Conjuring* proved to be an instant success, grossing \$41,855,326 in its opening weekend alone ("The Conjuring"). The film was produced and distributed by New Line Cinema (under its parent company, Warner Bros.), which produced films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), *Friday*

the 13th (2009), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006). At present, *The Conjuring* has raked in over \$300,000,000 and holds a rating of 7.5 on IMDb (“The Conjuring”).

As two widely known products of the possession subgenre, both of these films send mixed messages about gender, namely in their portrayals of female characters. In some ways, *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* incorporate representations of women that are progressive by the standards of the respective cultural periods in which they were made. For instance, both films construct scenarios in which female characters are professional, independent, and dominant in the context of their careers. However, the films also perpetuate the strict, binary norms that accompany hegemonic understandings of femininity by suggesting an association between femininity and supernatural victimization. Ultimately, these films operate upon a tension between traditional and non-traditional concepts of femininity, leading to contradictory messages regarding the role of women at home and in society, at large.

Literature Review

In her formative theory on the intersection of Hollywood cinema and gender (written in 1973, the same year as *The Exorcist*'s release) feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis as a “political weapon” for “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 28). Building on the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Mulvey asserts that, within cinema, female characters are designated as objects of visual pleasure for the “male gaze” to look at (33). Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” refers to the ways in which female characters are treated as passive objects to be visually consumed by male characters and viewers. In this way, cinema constructs female figures from a masculine perspective.

According to Mulvey, this gaze offers viewers two types of pleasure. The first type, called scopophilic pleasure, refers to “using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (32). Through the second type of pleasure, which is a narcissistic extension of scopophilia, viewers identify with the objects that appear on screen, using the film as a mirror for self-reflection (Mulvey 32). Thus, paradoxically, viewers are led to identify with on-screen images while, at the same time, they must regard themselves as separate from these images in order to objectify them.

In the context of cinema, this “pleasure in looking” has led to a binary distinction within narratives, which construct male characters as active and female characters as passive (Mulvey 33). According to Mulvey, this distinction is bolstered by narratives that place women on display for male characters and spectators to take pleasure in looking at. Mulvey also notes a distinction between active and passive in the “division of labor” within narratives (34). Because Hollywood narratives are often male-driven, viewers are led to identify with the active male protagonist. Thus, the male becomes a mirror for viewers while the female character serves only as the passive object of desire, the “bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 29). For Mulvey, these distinctions signify the oppressive nature of the patriarchal form that dominates Hollywood cinema.

Mulvey’s work has greatly influenced subsequent film studies in which feminist theorists implement psychoanalysis in their own examinations of cinematic texts and genres. Taking inspiration from Mulvey, feminist film theorist Carol Clover examines gender in horror films by applying psychoanalytical theories to the slasher subgenre. For decades, both audiences and critics have derided slasher films as trivial texts bereft of artistic merit and meaning. Yet, according to Clover, slasher films are “a transparent source for (sub)cultural attitudes toward sex

and gender,” offering an unapologetic look at societal understandings of masculinity and femininity (“Her Body” 67-68).

Clover constructs her theories around a number of generic slasher figures, such as the killer, his victims, and the Final Girl. The killer, typically a male, is portrayed as an outsider from the onset. He is coded as developmentally stunted, confused about his gender, and sexually dysfunctional (“Her Body” 75-77). For his victims, sexual chastity is linked to survival, as nudity, intimacy, and intercourse are often indicative of death. Clover also notes that, in contrast to female deaths, those of male characters are often swift and viewed from a distance (“Her Body” 80-82). Perhaps Clover’s most significant contribution to the study of horror is her Final Girl theory, which describes the reoccurring motif of a lone female survivor who must defeat the killer. She is often depicted as sexually inactive and lacking traditional feminine qualities. Through her Final Girl theory, Clover addresses criticisms that have accused the horror genre of objectifying women by glorying in their slaughter. For Clover, by concluding with the triumphant liberation of a female protagonist, slasher films empower a female perspective (“Her Body” 87). Thus, unlike Mulvey in her arguments against Hollywood cinema, Clover recognizes a message of empowerment in these films. She also notes that, by drawing male viewers into the perspective of a female protagonist, slasher films go a step further by facilitating “cross-gender identification” (“Her Body” 91). According to Clover, it is in this gender identity game that the slasher subgenre thrives.

Despite these seemingly progressive elements, many argue that slasher films remain problematic in their depictions of masculinity and femininity, namely in their tendency to disempower female characters. Klaus Rieser builds on Clover’s theories in his analysis of characterization and male identification in slasher films. In his work, Rieser opens a dialogue

with three influential feminist scholars who have explored gender in horror films: Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, and Carol Clover (Rieser 371). As Rieser explains, according to Williams, the male viewer is fearful of both the female protagonist and the killer for their lack of maleness. In this way, horror films “conflate the woman with the monster” (372). Rieser also summarizes Creed’s argument, noting that slasher films depart from Mulvey’s theories in offering “a breaking of voyeurism and its positioning of the spectator as male” by using frightening images to compel the male spectator to look away from the screen (373). Finally, Rieser explains that Clover’s work emphasizes slasher films’ tendency to switch from the point-of-view of the male attacker to the female victim. According to Clover, in doing so, these films allow viewers to be fluid in their identification with characters and, consequently, genders (375).

However, for Rieser, gender messages in slasher films are more often in line with patriarchal norms. Disagreeing with Clover, Rieser argues that male viewers are not meant to identify with the Final Girl. Rather, they are led to empathize with female victimhood. Further, while viewers are led to accept the Final Girl’s non-traditional gender identity, the idea of the killer straying from traditional masculinity remains horrific. Notably, the killer is set apart as a queer figure who must die and his “monstrosity is almost always defined in terms of gender deviance or sexual deviance from a hegemonic masculine ideal” (Rieser 380). Thus, in defeating the idiosyncratic killer, what the Final Girl really kills is difference (Rieser 377).

Numerous scholars, including Rieser and Clover, have also noted the tendency of slasher films to punish sexually active women with violence. Scholar Andrew Welsh builds upon this idea by performing a quantitative study on the link between sexual activity and survival among male and female characters (763). In his analysis of 50 North American slasher films, Welsh finds that female characters that engage in sexual activity are less likely to survive than virginal

women or men. Further, the death scenes of sexually active women are longer than those of males while female characters that do not have sex are cast in a positive light in contrast to those who do (765-766). According to Welsh, in punishing immoral behavior, slasher films differentiate between “good girls” and “bad girls,” and it is because of the Final Girl’s “good girl” morality that she is able to overcome the killer. Thus, she is rewarded for succumbing to “appropriate female behavior, while ‘bad girls’ are punished with brutally graphic death scenes” (763). For Welsh, this distinction is troublesome, as it can have real-life implications for female viewers who might internalize such a binary standard. Welsh cites the work of researchers Penny Reid and Gillian Finchilescu as grounds for his concern, as both noted heightened feelings of “disempowerment” in female viewers who were exposed to scenes showing violence against women (771). According to Welsh, such research proves that “sexually-objectifying media may negatively impact various aspects of women’s self- concept, such as body image and self-esteem” (771).

As seen in the work of both Clover and Creed, there are ways in which slasher tropes and characters might be decoded as progressive. Still, scholars such as Williams, Rieser, and Welsh recognize that the subgenre often resorts to problematic depictions of gender that are largely oppressive for women. These two conflicting views speak to the overall inconsistency of gender-related messages in slasher films, and in the horror genre at large; while some films appear to break the mold of normative gender ideals, many simply perpetuate the patriarchal status quo. However, further research is needed before the nature of these representations and their effects upon viewers can be better understood.

While a majority of research on gender representations in horror has focused on slasher films, few studies have sought to examine representations in other horror subgenres, especially

those found within possession films. Though her most known theories pertain to slasher films, Carol Clover also addresses representations of masculinity and femininity in tales of possession by examining them through the lens of psychoanalysis. According to Clover, within these films, the female body almost always serves as a portal, susceptible to the infiltration of evil. She cites *The Exorcist* as evidence of this trend as, within the film, young Regan's body becomes the site of possession. Clover also notes that *The Exorcist* often prompts viewers to focus on Regan's bodily openings; for instance, the bed-ridden position that Regan assumes for most of the film is indicative of female openness, as her legs are emphatically spread to suggest that she is an open vessel ("Opening Up" 70). Clover adds that, even when a male body serves as the portal, the male character is often coded as feminine, and thus possession is still rendered a female experience ("Opening Up" 70-71). Ultimately, in making the subjects of possession invariably female, these films suggest women are physically and emotionally open beings, and thus prone to supernatural victimization.

Clover goes on to posit that the psychological significance of the possession story resides within the male bystander, as he struggles to decide: "should he cling to his rational, scientific understanding of human behavior, or should he yield to the irrational? To that quandary the experience of the troubled woman, however theatrical its manifestation, is largely accessory" ("Opening Up" 85). In *The Exorcist*, Father Karras experiences a spiritual crisis in the aftermath of his mother's passing. Further, throughout the film, he struggles to reconcile his religious orientation with his professional, psychiatric practices; thus, his crisis pertains not only to his life, but also to his faith. For Clover, the narrative of *The Exorcist* is driven by the resolution of Karras' dilemma, while Regan's journey through demonic possession is only significant insofar

as it affects those around her (namely Karras), an argument that echoes Mulvey's description of female characters as passive objects within male-driven narratives ("Opening Up" 85).

Clover also notes a recurring, gender-based conflict between the intervening powers of White Science and Black Magic. While White Science represents a logical masculine approach, Black Magic is a superstitious, emotionally-driven female approach. Within the possession story, these two competing systems seek definitive answers through different means. While White Science is driven by Western rational tradition, utilizing tools of surgery, drugs, and psychotherapy, Black Magic employs methods of Satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk religions ("Opening Up" 66). In *The Exorcist*, White Science is pursued first, as Regan is subjected to a range of examinations that prove futile. Later, Black Magic prevails through the intervention of Father Merrin, a Jesuit priest. The conflict between White Science and Black Magic can also be traced in Father Karras' narrative, as he is tending to an internal conflict between his religious beliefs and his rational, psychiatric perspective. Therefore, Karras is deliberating the powers of White Science and Black Magic on an individual level.

As Clover explains, the conflict between the contrasting systems of White Science and Black Magic is twofold, as it is "a deeply gendered one, constitutive of a conflict between male and female and also constitutive, within the male story, of a conflict between masculine and feminine" ("Opening Up" 98). Within *The Exorcist*, Father Karras must accept the existence of the supernatural, thus opening up to the reality of Regan's condition, in order to effectively intervene ("Opening Up" 98). Thus, the possession plot requires that the male bystander emerge from the film as a rational man accepting the irrational and, in turn, he must "open" up to his feminine nature, ultimately making himself susceptible to possession. As Clover says, "the male story of occult horror is an echo version of the female story: it tells of being opened up by and to

something, letting something in” (“Opening Up” 101). Consequently, the possession story depicts a long-standing social taboo: the feminization of a man. By feminizing male characters, possession films reject hegemonic masculinity; as Clover explains, these films “consistently repudiate a kind of masculinity that mainstream commentary imagines to be a cultural ideal” (“Opening Up” 113).

Recently, some scholars have called for future feminist film theory to depart from a psychoanalytical approach to studying horror films. Theorist Cynthia Freeland encourages feminist film theorists to move beyond the “psychodynamic framing” approach championed by Mulvey, Williams, Creed, and Clover (742). Freeland offers several reasons why such a shift is necessary. According to her, psychoanalysis is a questionable psychological theory that is not entirely accepted, especially today (746). Freeland also claims that psychoanalytical approaches oversimplify film theory by focusing on symbolic meaning while missing out on films’ social and historical implications and production conditions, such as directors’ or distributors’ intentions (747). Freeland also notes that psychoanalysis is more prevalent in feminist film theory than in feminist theory at large, indicating that feminist scholarship has evolved beyond the realm of psychoanalysis. Freeland encourages film theorists to follow suit (748).

Freeland goes on to highlight various flaws in Clover’s theories on gender in horror. She criticizes Clover’s adoption of the “one sex” model, in which femininity is viewed as a “defective version of masculinity” (750). She also points out Clover’s failure to account for the rich history of horror and its various subgenres and tropes; Freeland notes that, although Clover does attempt to account for horror’s history, she doesn’t go far enough back in time to do so effectively. For Freeland, it is important for future studies to more adequately consider the history and diversity of horror’s subgenres, subject matter, and depictions.

Freeland defines two distinct functions of feminist film theory, both of which are necessary components of an effective understanding of the horror genre. First, she describes an “extra-filmic” approach, which deals with “concrete” aspects of a film’s production, reception, historical significance, and the social environment surrounding it. Freeland then describes an “intra-filmic” approach to film theory, which focuses on representation within a film by examining its “construction” and its “role in culture” (752). Such an approach looks at elements of structure, characters, plot, and point of view alongside big-picture elements, such as a film’s representation of gender and the director’s intentions. Thus, much like a psychoanalytical approach to film theory, an “intra-filmic” method aims to unveil a comprehensive understanding of representation “so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between the sexes” (Freeland 752). Yet, unlike a psychoanalytical approach, Freeland’s proposed method would treat films as “artifacts” by looking at them from all sides, including production and viewer reception and interpretation. To accomplish the above, Freeland explains that theorists must begin by asking questions about plot, characters, and point of view before examining the “gender ideology” and wider cultural implications of films (752).

Freeland moves on to demonstrate her proposed framework for feminist film theory by providing her own brief analysis of three films: *Jurassic Park*, *The Fly*, and *Repulsion*. Within her analysis, Freeland looks at aspects of narrative, plot, and production. She also considers the various ways in which viewers might interpret the ideological implications of the three films. In both *Jurassic Park* and *The Fly*, Freeland finds that, although the films offer seemingly positive portrayals of successful, professional women, such representations are subverted by the films’ gender ideology. For instance, similar to what Mulvey says of Hollywood cinema, Freeland finds that the narratives are driven by the actions of male characters. Further, both films undermine

female characters' careers by portraying them as less knowledgeable and successful than their male counterparts. Ultimately, these women serve the purpose of tending to male characters' emotions, employing the emotional intelligence that is assumed to be an inherent aspect of their sex. Thus, both films perpetuate "the ideological message that women are primarily creatures of their emotions who exist first and foremost in their love relations to men" (Freeland 759). In contrast, *Repulsion*'s protagonist comes in the form of a female "slasher" who is out to kill men. Yet, according to Freeland, the film refuses to treat her as anything horrible, instead choosing to paint her as a victim of her own psychosis (760). Thus, Freeland's findings echo Rieser's description of the Final Girl: viewers are not meant to identify with the female protagonist. Rather, they are led to regard her as a figure of female victimhood.

In closing, Freeland distinguishes her own ideological approach to film theory from a traditional Marxist approach, which would view production as an all-controlling force (760). Thus, Freeland separates herself from Theodor Adorno, who argues that the culture industry holds all of the power and is capable of manipulating the masses into decoding content exactly as intended (Adorno 32-33). Freeland instead adopts the approach of Stuart Hall, who holds that audience members have the capacity to decode the messages that they receive, and thus they have certain agency in interpreting media texts (Hall 59-61). Moving forward, Freeland recognizes the need for feminist film theorists to consider the potential for diverse decodings and reactions to horror films in order to form a more effective framework for analyzing reception and interpretation among viewers.

With the above arguments in mind, the field of research on gender in horror films would seemingly benefit from scholarship that aims to move beyond the psychoanalytic approaches that have dominated feminist film theory in the past. It is also apparent that, compared to those on the

slasher subgenre, theories on the possession subgenre remain underdeveloped. Finally, the current landscape of feminist film theory on horror films calls for research that more adequately considers viewer reception, especially among female audience members. Thus, studies that move beyond a psychoanalytic framework in looking at messages of masculinity and femininity within modern depictions of possession would make valuable contributions to the field. Further, questions that address how audience members might decode these messages and what effect they stand to have on societal understandings of gender must be asked before we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection of horror, gender and film. While an analysis of audience reception is beyond the scope of this study, my research scrutinizes various messages that are seemingly encoded in possession films, and thus explores potential decoding positions that viewers will assume when consuming these texts. Ultimately, this thesis endeavors to answer the following question: do possession films satisfy or subvert dominant-hegemonic understandings of femininity in their portrayal of female characters? And, to what extent have these portrayals evolved to incorporate more progressive understandings of femininity?

Method

Often noted for its influence on American popular culture, *The Exorcist* was the first horror film to be nominated for Best Picture Academy Award (“The Exorcist”). Today, it stands as the third highest grossing horror film of all time (“Highest-Grossing”). Hence, I chose the film as a primary text in light of its popularity among viewers and critics alike. I also selected the film in order to respond to Clover’s findings as, within my study, I worked to converse with several of the points that she makes in her analysis of the possession subgenre, namely those that incorporate psychoanalytical concepts. For my next text, I sought to identify a second widely known, successful possession film. To do so, I consulted a recent list of the highest grossing

horror films worldwide; out of 25 films, *The Conjuring* landed at number seven, with a total gross of \$318,000,141, making it the second highest-grossing possession film on the list, next to *The Exorcist* (“Highest-Grossing”). The film also received rave reviews from viewers and critics, alike. Within my study, I compared this recent example of a successful possession film to its predecessor, *The Exorcist*. In doing so, I sought to explore these films outside of the context of psychoanalysis, as championed by various feminist film theorists, including Clover. I then looked for ways in which gender representations within possession films have or have not evolved over time and how audiences might decode their meaning.

As the above analyses evidence, there are various methods that scholars can use to trace themes and messages in media texts. Within their work, Clover, Williams, Creed, and Rieser rely on textual analysis as a means of exposing ideological messages embedded in horror films. Similarly, media scholar John Fiske uses textual analysis to reveal the presence of ideology within popular television series. Taking a semiotic approach, Fiske exposes the ways in which television shows incorporate codes that are representative of dominant sections of society, and thus are representative of dominant ideology (220). Fiske describes a code as a system through which members of a culture communicate meaning through signs (221). In his own analysis, he focuses on codes, or representations, of cultural constructs of race, class, and gender. According to Fiske, these codes can be organized into three levels. The first level is reality, which is already encoded with agreed upon social codes, including appearance, gesture, environment, and speech. The second level is representation, which includes the technical codes that are employed to convey reality, such as camera, lighting, editing, music, and sound. The third and final level is ideology, which is formed when the representational codes of level two converge to convey big-picture, ideological messages regarding race, class, patriarchy, capitalism, and more (Fiske 222).

This is significant because, as Fiske describes, representations within media texts are generally constructed upon a dominant ideological framework, and if viewers decode texts in a way that is in line with this ideology, they will be drawn into the dominant perspective. Thus, if viewers adopt a dominant hegemonic position when viewing media texts, they will be restricted to peering through the lens of popular ideology (Fiske 228).

Taking inspiration from Fiske, I used textual analysis to identify codes pertaining to gender within tales of possession. I observed *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* in detail to record their messages regarding femininity, both subtle and overt. I questioned any and all elements that contributed to the creation of meaning, including narrative, lighting, mise-en-scene, acting, and sound. With Fiske's research in mind, I considered what codes, both social and technical, designate characters as masculine or feminine. Reflecting upon these details, I looked for indicators of traditional and non-traditional masculine and feminine traits among female characters and placed those representations in the context of their individual experiences. Thus, I looked at the ways in which each character conforms to or breaks away from normative gender roles (in this case, femininity) and compared this to their position within the overall narrative.

In doing so, I sought to identify the messages that these films communicate regarding gender and its association with supernatural victimization. Are they in line with or divergent from dominant hegemonic understandings of femininity? Is the concept of female openness detectable through physical displays as Clover suggests, or is something else being conveyed? And how might the films' messages be interpreted without the tools of psychoanalysis? In comparing the two films, I contemplated whether or not the subgenre seems to have evolved over time. Finally, I considered what the films' ideological messages might be telling viewers. Do they perpetuate the patriarchal status quo, or are they closer to the feminist ideal of woman as an

autonomous agent of her own will? Moving to Fiske's third level of coding, I considered the ideological implications of these portrayals by examining the impact that they might have on modern audiences and how they fit into the context of social environment, past and present. Ultimately, I analyzed these films by considering all three levels of coding, as described by Fiske: reality, representation, and ideology. I also examined the films with Freeland's suggestions in mind; namely, I attempted to treat them as "artifacts" by contemplating their representational aspects alongside their larger cultural implications, historical significance, and production conditions (Freeland 752).

Analysis

The Exorcist follows the experience of Regan (Linda Blair), a teenage girl who becomes possessed by a demonic entity after playing with an Ouija board. Regan's single mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), is a famed actress who finds her life in shambles when her daughter starts exhibiting strange symptoms. Chris works to save Regan by seeking help from two priests, who team up in exorcising the demon from Regan's body. Since its 1973 release, *The Exorcist* has sustained a reputation for shocking audiences with its troubling depiction of demonic possession. Like *The Exorcist*, and many possession films that have followed, the 2013 horror film *The Conjuring* incorporates the motif of a female body possessed. The film recounts the allegedly true story of two paranormal investigators, Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga), who assist the Perron family in fighting off a malevolent spirit that dwells within their Rhode Island farmhouse. Ultimately, the spirit that haunts the Perron's home comes to inhabit the body of Carolyn Perron (Lili Taylor), the family's matriarch.

In performing my analysis, I found that both *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* perpetuate the binary norms of a patriarchal standard by suggesting that female characters are vulnerable,

open, submissive, and suited for domesticity. In *The Conjuring*, this claim is substantiated by the film's treatment of the Perron women, namely in its tendency to highlight their femininity in moments when they are physically assaulted by the spirit that haunts their home. It is also substantiated by the film's portrayal of Carolyn as open, submissive, and physically and psychologically vulnerable; the same can be said of *The Exorcist's* treatment of Regan. Yet, in other ways, *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* incorporate progressive representations of gender by constructing two female characters (Chris and Lorraine) that exhibit traditionally masculine traits of professionalism, dominance, and independence. Ultimately, *The Exorcist* challenges these qualities by suggesting a correlation between Chris' career and Regan's vulnerability to the demon. Throughout the course of Regan's possession, the film draws Chris into a domestic sphere as she is forced to stay home and tend to her daughter. Similarly, *The Conjuring* explores the possibility of Lorraine trading in her career for a more domestic life. However, the film ultimately privileges her non-traditional feminine traits, as she chooses to continue working.

Beneath the overt motif of a female possessed, an array of (often contradictory) gender-related messages reside within these two possession stories. Ultimately, both films subvert the gender binary in their portrayals of professional, independent, and dominant women while simultaneously linking femininity to standards of passivity, domesticity, and vulnerability. Thus, although both films offer progressive female characters, they largely perpetuate binary norms that satisfy hegemonic understandings of femininity, as informed by patriarchy.

Female Vulnerability

Within both *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist*, female characters are portrayed as susceptible to supernatural harassment and assault. In this way, the films link femininity to gendered characteristics such as openness, passivity, and an inherent need for protection (often

provided by male characters). In *The Conjuring*, the association between femininity and vulnerability first surfaces in the film's prologue, which flashes back to 1968 to follow two female roommates who are harassed by a demonic entity that has latched onto a doll named Annabelle. The haunted doll's appearance is notably feminine, as she wears a white-ruffled dress with matching bows in each of her pigtails; her small porcelain face is painted to create the appearance of makeup. The two young women who are harassed by the demonic doll work as nurses, a historically gendered career. As two caring, sensitive young women, they take pity on the spirit and invite it to possess the doll and thus enter their lives. During a scene that recounts their most dramatic experience with the entity, the two wake in the middle of the night to a loud knocking on their front door. They emerge from their bedrooms to confront the spirit, each wearing a pair of pink, floral pajamas. Following the confrontation, they are left feeling frightened and defenseless against their harasser, so they seek help from the Warrens.

The film then moves forward in time to introduce the Perrons, a family almost entirely comprised of women. The group consists of five daughters, their mother, Carolyn, and their father, Roger; even the family's dog, Sadie, is female. As director James Wan notes, "...and the fact that pretty much all of the family, except for the father are all female. I think that gave the movie a very sort of feminine edge to it" (qtd. in Chavez). In their opening scene, the Perrons can be heard before they can be seen. Gazing through a window from within the haunted farmhouse, the camera observes their station wagon traveling up the overgrown driveway. As the car approaches the home, the girls sing a happy rendition of "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt." The sound of their soft, high-pitched voices evokes a sense of vulnerable femininity, which is promptly underscored with a lingering shot of them emerging from the relative safety of their vehicle.

After the family moves in, they discover that multiple spirits reside in their new home, the most sinister of which is Bathsheba, a witch who killed herself on the property over a century ago. As Lorraine Warren warns, “You have a lot of spirits in here, but there is one I’m most worried about because it is so hateful.” By the film’s conclusion, Bathsheba’s spirit assaults all seven female members of the Perron family. Carolyn is the first to experience physical harm as, after spending her first night in the home, she wakes to find a large bruise on her shin. Later that morning, the Perron’s youngest daughter, April, runs outside to greet the family’s dog, Sadie, who refused to enter the haunted farmhouse on move-in day. Much to her horror, April finds the dog dead under a tree.

As time goes on, one of the daughters, Christine, starts feeling an invisible force tugging on her foot in the middle of the night. When it happens a second time, her foot is jerked so hard that it nearly pulls her off of the bed. Before the assault, the camera looks down on Christine sprawled out on her bed, clad in pale, ruffled pajamas; she then shifts into a fetal position just before her foot is tugged on. When she sits up to search the room for her harasser, she is cast in soft moonlight; a close-up shows her doe-like eyes filling with tears as she scans the room. She is a vision of feminine vulnerability.

Meanwhile, the oldest daughter, Andrea, starts waking up to find her sister, Cindy, sleeping walking in her room. When Andrea first discovers this, Cindy is shown standing in front of a wardrobe; she is wearing a pink, frilly nightgown and a wide shot shows her slight form standing in front of the towering structure, methodically banging her head on its doors. The film establishes that, although Cindy has a history of sleepwalking, the habit has taken a physically harmful manifestation in the farmhouse; as Andrea observes, “I’ve never seen her do this

before.” Although this offense on Cindy’s body is a result of her own sleepwalking, it is the spirit of Bathsheba that compels her to harm herself in her sleep.

When Cindy sleepwalks into Andrea’s room a second time, Andrea gently guides her back to bed; however, when the wardrobe continues making noise, Andrea moves to look inside. Like her sister, she is dressed in a pink nightgown with floral and lace details. As she approaches the wardrobe, the camera shifts to her perspective and a low angle shot scans upwards to show the structure stretching high above her; its looming appearance makes Andrea appear small and defenseless. A zoom shot then shows Bathsheba crouching on top of the wardrobe before launching herself at Andrea. Pinned to the floor, Andrea helplessly claws at her attacker.

The next assault on a Perron daughter occurs when a spirit latches onto Nancy’s hair, sending her flying into a glass doorway before violently dragging her across the floor. Later, during the film’s climactic exorcism scene, Carolyn’s body suffers numerous physical assaults while she is possessed with the spirit of Bathsheba. After the Warren’s subdue Carolyn by wrapping her in a sheet and tying her to a chair, the spirit levitates her body and sends her crashing to the ground, leaving the chair in shambles. Carolyn then proceeds to hunt her youngest daughter, April, chasing her through the house’s crawlspace; when she catches April, she aggressively grabs her and prepares to stab her. And with that, all seven female Perrons, including the family dog, have been physically harmed or attacked by Bathsheba’s spirit.

The connection between femininity and vulnerability to supernatural abuse is also evident within the Warren family, as Ed and Lorraine’s daughter, Judy, is subjected to an attack from Bathsheba. While her parents are away, Judy feels something pulling on her foot in the middle of the night. She is then chased through the house by a loud banging noise before being locked in a room with Bathsheba, who sits in a rocking chair brushing the Annabelle doll’s hair, a grotesque

mimicry of a moment that Lorraine and Judy share earlier in film. Judy's parents come to her rescue just as the spirit flings the large wooden rocking chair at her body.

As a paranormal investigator and clairvoyant, Lorraine Warren is highly attuned to the supernatural world. One might argue that her husband, Ed, is just as attuned, as he too works as a paranormal investigator; however, due to her abilities, Lorraine experiences the supernatural in a way that is highly sensory, as she can see and hear spirits. Further, she exhibits an emotional response to these interactions, which often leave her mentally and physically drained. As Ed describes, "It takes a toll on her... a little piece each time." Thus, Ed does not experience the supernatural in the same way that Lorraine does. Namely, he is not emotionally or physically weakened by his work, making him significantly less vulnerable than his wife. The film's director, James Wan, has even acknowledged his own intent to construct Lorraine as vulnerable. When discussing casting for Lorraine's character, he says of actress Vera Farmiga: "I love the sensibility that she has. I love that she's a strong woman, but she can also bring a sense of vulnerability as well to the role that it needed for Lorraine" (qtd. in Chavez).

In the scenarios detailed above, the film's plotline works with elements of *mise-en-scène*, including acting, lighting, costuming, and camerawork, to accentuate female characters' femininity and vulnerability. Further, the film repeatedly juxtaposes visual indicators of traditional femininity with situations in which women are vulnerable, thus suggesting a correlation between the two. In this way, the film incorporates codes from all three of Fiske's levels to communicate female vulnerability, as elements of reality, namely appearance, converge with elements of representation to convey larger ideological messages regarding gender.

Further, these female characters seem especially vulnerable when compared to their male counterparts. For instance, none of the female characters provoke entities to attack; rather, they

are passive in their interactions with the supernatural. In contrast, the only instances in which male characters are harassed or assaulted by the supernatural take place during Carolyn's exorcism, when they are actively working to expel Bathsheba's spirit. During the exorcism, Ed suffers two violent attacks: a massive wooden bureau is knocked over in an attempt to injure him and a gun is fired at him. Roger is also attacked during the exorcism. However, these assaults are in retaliation for the men's role in exorcising the spirit.

A minor character named Brad represents a diversion from this treatment of male characters. Brad volunteers to assist the Warrens in investigating the Perron's home, though he is a skeptic of the supernatural. He is also the most traditionally masculine character; he works as a cop, he wears a mustache, and he speaks in a noticeably deeper voice than the other men. During the investigation, Brad sees the ghost of a maid who killed herself on the property, making him the only male character to see an entity with his own eyes. Further, the ghost shoves him, making him the only male victim of an unprovoked supernatural assault. Seemingly, in his victimhood, he is aligned with the film's women. Yet, *The Conjuring's* treatment of Brad prior to this assault convolutes things, as several scenes serve to make fun of him. For instance, a fellow crewmember teases Brad for looking afraid when a door inexplicably slams shut; Brad claims, "it must have been a draft," to which the crewmember responds, "that's funny, a draft never put that look on my face before." In moments such as this, the viewer is compelled to find humor in Brad's skepticism. The viewer is also compelled to expect that he will eventually learn a lesson about doubting the supernatural, which he does. After Carolyn's dramatic exorcism, Brad concludes, "I'd take a guy with a gun any day." In its treatment of Brad, the film encourages viewers to find humor in a stereotypically masculine lack of openness and sensitivity, in this case, towards the supernatural.

Women Possessed

Both *The Conjuring* and *The Possession* incorporate the reoccurring motif of female bodies serving as accessible portals that can be infiltrated by the supernatural. As Clover states, “The portals of the occult horror are almost invariably women” and, in deviant cases in which the portal is presented as anatomically male, possession is still deemed a female experience (“Opening Up” 70-71). In *The Exorcist*, Regan serves as the female portal through which possession occurs, while *The Conjuring* designates Carolyn as its object of possession. During interviews, William Peter Blatty, producer and writer of *The Exorcist* and the 1971 novel by the same name, has expressed his desire for the film to strengthen viewers’ faith (Head). In writing *The Exorcist*, Blatty was inspired by a 1949 exorcism that involved a 14-year-old boy referred to by the pseudonym Roland Doe; Blatty recalls hearing about Doe during a particularly low point in his faith as a Roman Catholic. According to Blatty, the case helped strengthen his beliefs and he hoped that *The Exorcist* would do the same for audiences (Head). Though not a Catholic, Director William Friedkin shared Blatty’s intentions: “I thought it was a film about the mystery of faith...” (qtd. in Parker). Thus, in creating *The Exorcist*, both Blatty and Friedkin sought to tell a story that would have a lasting impact on viewers; in doing so, they faced the challenging task of telling a story that defies the laws of nature in a way that seems all too real.

In the process of writing the book, Blatty elected to make a 12-year-old girl the object of possession, rather than a teenage boy like Doe. Perhaps, in doing so, Blatty was aiming for originality, as he has repeatedly stated that *The Exorcist* is merely inspired by Doe’s case. However, it is also possible that Blatty’s decision to use a young girl was motivated by an understanding of traditional gendered characteristics of female openness, submissiveness, and vulnerability; perhaps the concept of a young girl being the victim of such an experience seemed

more believable. It's also possible that dominant-hegemonic notions of femininity made a female victim seem more jarring, as the idea of a young female body being so grotesquely abused is especially horrifying in a culture that values female purity and innocence and assumes an inherent need for protection among women. As Father Karras asks Father Merrin during Regan's ordeal, "Why her? Why this girl?" to which Merrin responds, "I think the point is to make us despair."

Evidently, stereotyped gender codings influence *The Exorcist's* portrayal of Regan, as elements of mise-en-scène allude to her female openness, sensitivity, submissiveness, and vulnerability. As Clover discusses, the concept of female openness is reflected in *The Exorcist's* fascination with Regan's bodily openings, as several scenes prompt the viewer to focus on her mouth and vagina. For instance, she projectile vomits numerous times while bound to her bed. Even her bed-ridden position, which she assumes for most of the film, is indicative of her openness, as her legs are spread apart, emphasizing that she is an open vessel ("Opening Up" 79-80). In one of the film's more disturbing scenes, Chris walks into Regan's room to find her masturbating with a crucifix; Regan's thin pastel nightgown is bloodstained from the assault.

Though to a lesser extent, *The Conjuring* also emphasizes the openness of its female portal, Carolyn, by focusing on her bodily openings. Carolyn first becomes possessed when a physical manifestation of Bathsheba's spirit floats above her bed while she is sleeping; the spirit then vomits a red, blood-like substance into Carolyn's mouth. Later, Carolyn ejects the spirit by vomiting the same substance. As Clover notes, within possession films, the implication of female openness plays upon the idea that the female body is an open vessel and that, biologically, women are capable of taking objects into their inner space; as Clover states, "whether through the actual throat or the "mother throat" [the vagina], women gulp things in" ("Opening Up" 79).

In both *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring*, Regan and Carolyn are portrayed as submissive to the entities that possess them. Both films explain that the women are present in their bodies; their personalities are merely dormant because their possessors have overpowered them. As the demon (in Regan's body) explains to Father Karras when he asks where Regan is: "In here. With us." By noting that Regan and Carolyn have been overpowered from within, allowing unknown forces to assume control of their bodies, the films imply that these women are submissive. Feminine submissiveness is more strongly imposed on Carolyn, as the Warrens encourage her to fight the spirit of Bathsheba from within, as they explain that Carolyn is capable of overpowering her possessor, if only she tries hard enough. The implication that Carolyn, a victim of supernatural assault, can somehow overcome the spirit and force it out of her body suggests that it was a lack of dominance that has allowed the spirit to remain in her body.

Like other female characters in *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist*, Regan and Carolyn are physically vulnerable to supernatural assault. However, they are psychologically vulnerable, as well; as Father Merrin warns Father Karras of demonic entities: "the attack is psychological, Damien, and powerful." In *The Conjuring*, the Warrens list the three stages of possession as infestation, oppression, and possession. As Ed describes, the second stage, oppression, occurs when "the victim, and it's usually the one who's the most psychologically vulnerable, is targeted specifically by an external force." This description implies that Carolyn is the most psychologically vulnerable in the Perron family, as she is the one who becomes possessed.

Though the film doesn't explicitly state the root of Carolyn's psychological vulnerability, there are numerous factors that it might stem from. Her family has just relocated from New Jersey to Rhode Island. It's also clear that her oldest daughter, Andrea, is unhappy about the move, as she complains to her parents that she had no say in the matter; throughout the film,

Carolyn does her best to encourage all of her daughters to be open to their new home. The film also implies that the family is experiencing financial hardship during a phone conversation that Roger has about a potential job. Adding to Carolyn's burden is the fact that Roger, a truck driver, is usually away from home, thus she is often left alone to tend to the house and their five daughters. In one scene, Carolyn is shown folding laundry in her bedroom while Roger is away from home. The 1959 Betsy Brye song "Sleep Walk" plays in the background; the lyrics speak to Carolyn's plight: "The night fills my lonely place...and when you walk inside the door, I will sleep walk no more." In light of the above factors, it is Carolyn's role as wife and mother that contributes to her mental stress, leaving her psychologically vulnerable to possession. Yet, it is also her role as wife and mother that saves her from possession as, during her exorcism, Lorraine urges her to think of her children and husband: "You said they meant the world do you...this is what you'll be leaving behind." With this, the spell is broken and Carolyn purges the spirit out of her body. In the context of *The Conjuring*, it seems that family is all that a housewife like Carolyn has to live for.

In *The Exorcist*, Regan likely suffers psychological stress as a result of her mother Chris' career. Like Carolyn, Regan is in a state of transition, having relocated from Los Angeles to Georgetown for Chris' job. Her age also speaks to transition, as she has just turned twelve and is thus within the range for the onset of puberty, suggesting a transformation from girlhood to womanhood. It's also apparent that Chris is often away from home because of work. Considering her circumstances, it's possible that Regan feels stressed, out of place, and neglected. Adding to her plight is her absentee father, who neglects to call on her birthday. The fact that Regan is saved by a holy Catholic "Father" seems ironic, considering her own father's neglect. In both *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist*, upheaval, stress, and isolation within the family structure leave

Regan and Carolyn psychologically vulnerable and thus susceptible to supernatural harassment and, eventually, possession.

Working Mothers

In *The Exorcist*, Regan's mother, Chris, is portrayed as an empowered, successful, career-oriented woman. Chris is a noteworthy American actress who is working on location in Washington D.C. As a consequence, she has had to uproot her daughter from their home in Los Angeles for the duration of the film's production. *The Exorcist* makes a point of highlighting Chris' professional success, the extent of which is first implied by her financial independence and her ability to provide for her daughter as a single parent. For instance, despite spending much of her time at work, Chris ensures that Regan is taken care of by hiring three employees to assist her during her time in Washington, including her personal assistant, Sharon. This also emphasizes Chris' position of power over many of those around her, as she is often shown giving orders to her employees, instructing them on how to operate her household and how to care for her daughter. Chris is also able to afford the cost of rent in a large, luxurious home in Georgetown, Washington (noted for being an expensive and exclusive place to live), while financing the construction of a new home back in Los Angeles. The above points work together to paint Chris as a financially independent mother who is prosperous in her career.

The film also accentuates her professional success by referencing her widespread fame. In one early scene, Chris' assistant, Sharon, informs her that she has been invited to the White House for a small, intimate dinner. Later, a detective who shows up at Chris' home to question her about a recent homicide asks for her autograph before leaving. *The Exorcist* inserts these signals to indicate that Chris has achieved a high level of stardom within her career, and it is through the wealth and status that accompany this stardom that she is empowered.

Although *The Exorcist* portrays Chris as a loving and caring mother, it also suggests that her career often keeps her from spending quality time with Regan. For instance, in their first on-screen interaction, Chris returns home from filming and greets Regan by asking how her day was. As Chris' assistant, Sharon, joins Regan in recounting their day, it is clear that Sharon and Regan spent it together. This exchange is marked by such a sense of normalcy that it seems as if Regan is accustomed to spending many of her days with Sharon while her mother is away at work. Later, on the night of Regan's birthday, Chris wakes to the sound of her phone ringing; the sun has yet to rise and she is due on set. After hanging up the phone, she turns around to discover that Regan is lying next to her. Regan then complains that she couldn't sleep in her own room because her bed was shaking. Chris merely sighs and replies, "Honey," before exiting the room and heading to work. Chris appears most out of touch with her daughter in a scene in which she discovers that Regan has been playing with an Ouija board. The two are spending time in the basement when Chris notices the board under a stack of papers. When she asks Regan where it came from, Regan explains that she found it in the closet and has been using it to summon an entity that she refers to as Captain Howdy. While Chris does not appear concerned about Regan using the board, she is fazed by the fact that she was unaware of her daughter's daily activities. This brief moment hints at a tension between Chris' career and her role as Regan's mother.

Ultimately, *The Exorcist* emphasizes Chris' career only to place it on the backburner. When Regan starts acting strange, Chris begins to spend all of her time caring for Regan, transporting her from one doctor to another and watching her undergo various medical procedures. Eventually, Chris' work life comes to a complete standstill when Burke Dennings, the director of the film that she is working on, dies after being thrown from Regan's bedroom window. Thus, as the narrative progresses, Chris is forced to spend more and more time tending

to mayhem at home and less time at work; as a consequence, Chris' role as a professional woman is suppressed as her role as a mother comes to define her. Chris' wardrobe throughout the film is also indicative of her withdrawal from her career. When seeking medical attention for Regan, she is shown in plain pantsuits in muted tones. Later, when she approaches Karras for help, she is wearing a scarf around her head and large glasses that conceal most of her face; it is as if she is retreating into herself, trading in glamour for plainness. Ultimately, *The Exorcist* does not allow Chris to have it both ways; she cannot be a successful career woman and a good mother. In seeking help for her daughter, she must devote more of herself to her role as mother and less to her role as an actress. In this way, the narrative of *The Exorcist* ultimately privileges Chris' identity as mother over her identity as a professional woman, thus forcing her into a domestic sphere.

Notably, it is when Chris is most preoccupied with her career (while filming on location in Washington) that Regan becomes possessed. Thus, the film suggests a correlation between Chris' commitment to her career and her daughter's defenselessness in the face of the supernatural; without her mother around, Regan is vulnerable to the demonic entity. Of course, the absence of Regan's father might also contribute to her susceptibility. Perhaps Regan's desire for his presence explains why she is initially drawn to the masculine entity that she identifies as Captain Howdy. However, this mention of his absence is an isolated and subtle incident. Further, Regan's father does not have to suffer through the same lesson that Chris is taught: when Chris fails to wholly devote herself to her daughter, the consequences are severe. Ultimately, in linking the onset of Regan's possession to Chris spending time at work, *The Exorcist* suggests that Chris' commitment to her career is what renders Regan susceptible to demonic torment.

When considered against the cultural backdrop of the 1970s, *The Exorcist's* treatment of Chris' career gains new meaning. Throughout the decade, "as increasing numbers of women became politically active and states formed their own commissions on the status of women, the call for more serious attention to discrimination against women grew louder" (United States). Several important legislative developments bolstered this call for action, including the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which worked to ensure equal pay for working women and men, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which "prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion" (United States). In response, the U.S. labor force witnessed a gendered shift in employment. As more and more women left their homes to work, the decade between 1970 and 1980 saw employment among women rise from 38 percent to 43 percent ("Women's Bureau"). As a result, women's overall participation in the work force increased from 37.7 percent in 1960 to 43.3 percent in 1970; by 1980, it had reached 51.5 percent (United States). In considering *The Exorcist's* ideological messages, according to the codes within Fiske's third level, the film's anxiety towards Chris' career seems to speak to broader cultural anxieties regarding the entrance of women into the workforce, female liberation, and the resulting evolution of dominant hegemonic understandings of femininity and family structure.

The Conjuring presents two unique family structures in the Perrons and the Warrens. Carolyn Perron is a stay at home mother who spends much of her time tending to the domestic needs of her five young daughters; as the family's sole breadwinner, her husband, Roger, works as a truck driver and is often away from home for extended periods of time. Hence, the Perrons represent a traditional family structure in which the intersection of work and gender reflects hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. The Warrens' family structure is comparatively subversive, as both Ed and Lorraine are dedicated to their careers as paranormal

investigators. This dedication is emphasized by their relationship with their daughter, Judy, who is often left at home under the supervision of her grandmother. Ed and Lorraine's absence is highlighted in a scene in which Judy expresses her desire for her parents to spend more time with her, as she quietly confesses to Lorraine, "I miss you and daddy." Thus, as a mother, Lorraine resembles Regan's mother, Chris. Like Chris, Lorraine is often away from home and, consequently, away from her daughter.

Lorraine also faces a conflict between her role as a mother and her career, as her work as a paranormal investigator is a threat to her health and safety. Early in *The Conjuring*, Lorraine is described as a naturally gifted clairvoyant; the film also explains that she is in the process of recovering from an exorcism she recently assisted her husband on. As Ed describes, during the exorcism, Lorraine "saw" something that scarred her; Ed feared she wouldn't survive. After, in a weakened state, she locked herself in her room for days. With this plot point, *The Conjuring* sets the stakes high for Lorraine. Every time she chooses to work another day, it seems she is risking her life and, consequently, she risks making Judy a motherless child. Ultimately, it is Lorraine's journey that drives the narrative of *The Conjuring*, as she must choose between abandoning her work to tend to her role as wife and mother and risking it all to continue to help others. In the above ways, being separated from Judy leads to a dilemma for Lorraine; however, it does not lead to a dilemma for Ed, as he is able to continue his work without consequence. Though Ed is conflicted by his concern for Lorraine, such conflict does not transpire in his professional life.

Throughout the film, Ed expresses concern for Lorraine's wellbeing and often pleads for her to stop working. At one point, he tries sneaking off to investigate a case without her. Later, while inspecting the Warren's farmhouse, Ed catches Lorraine in a moment of domesticity as she

works to gather laundry from a clothesline. Hugging her from behind, he comments, “I could get used to this.” While Ed’s desire for Lorraine to refrain from work is largely out of regard for her safety, it also seems to reflect a deeper yearning for her to assume a more domestic persona as wife and mother by tending to matters within the safe confines of home.

Ultimately, like Chris in *The Exorcist*, Lorraine finds that devotion to her career comes at the price of terror and chaos at home, as the spirit that she is working to eject from the Perron’s farmhouse travels to her own home and attacks her daughter, Judy. This attack is foreshadowed by one ominous scene in which Carolyn and Lorraine discover that the spirit haunting the Perron’s home is that of a mother who sacrificed her child to the devil before taking her own life. In response to this information, Carolyn asks Lorraine, “How could a mother kill her own child?” Meanwhile, Lorraine’s own child is at home without the protection of her parents, leaving her vulnerable to a supernatural attack. Thus it seems that, in Lorraine’s case, a mother could kill her own child by being at work, away from home.

When Carolyn becomes possessed, Lorraine realizes that the spirit “possesses the mother to kill the child.” When interpreted within the context of Chris and Lorraine’s careers, these words speak to the representation of femininity in *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring*. In both films, work possesses mothers, and although Chris and Lorraine’s daughters survive their individual ordeals, they face potential death against the backdrop of their mother’s careers. In *The Exorcist*, Chris exhibits a shift from masculine to feminine. For instance, early in the film, many of her qualities are akin to stereotypical characteristics of masculinity, such as professionalism, dominance, and independence. However, the film requires that she adopt traditional feminine qualities in order to help her daughter, thus placing her in a more domestic role. In contrast, Lorraine represents a shift from feminine to masculine. In *The Conjuring*, Lorraine returns to

work after a hiatus; thus, she trades vulnerability, submissiveness, and domesticity for professionalism, dominance, and independence. Though both films take place in the 1970s, they explore the cultural climate of the decade in two very different ways. While *The Exorcist* succumbs to anxieties of the period in its treatment of Chris, *The Conjuring* offers a progressive alternative to this treatment by privileging Lorraine's non-traditional traits and allowing her to have it both ways in fulfilling her role as mother while keeping her career.

Conclusion

Through plot, dialogue, acting, lighting, costuming, and camerawork, *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist* combine codes of reality and representation to reinforce an ideological standard of feminine vulnerability among female characters; further, in relying on the motif of women possessed, they link femininity to traditional notions of openness, submissiveness, and physical and psychological vulnerability. Yet, these films concurrently subvert the gender binary by portraying women who are professional, independent, dominant, and empowered. In *The Exorcist*, such progressiveness is ultimately undermined, as Chris must embrace domesticity in light of her daughter's possession. This treatment may be indicative of cultural anxieties of the 1970s, a decade in which patriarchal standards faced severe backlash while a movement towards female liberation gained momentum. In *The Conjuring*, a more recent possession film, Lorraine faces a conflict between her career and her role as wife and mother. However, by the film's conclusion, she is affirmed in her commitment to her work. Ultimately, by empowering Lorraine in the context of her career, *The Conjuring* challenges the gender ideology that motivated *The Exorcist's* domestication of Chris, thus disrupting binary concepts of gender and embracing a more fluid definition of femininity.

In her analysis of the possession subgenre, Clover ascertains that the psychological significance of the possession story resides in the male bystander, as he struggles through a crisis against the backdrop of a woman possessed (“Opening Up” 85). Yet, *The Conjuring* diverts from this claim by assigning a female character, Lorraine, the role of bystander. It may appear her husband, Ed, represents the bystander because he is male and is in charge of conducting the exorcism. However, Lorraine more adequately fits Clover’s description, as she faces a dilemma within her personal life and is ultimately responsible for exorcising the spirit from Carolyn’s body. In her analysis, Clover also claims that the structure of the male bystander’s journey appears linear in contrast to the circular journey of the possessed woman; while witnessing possession is somehow transformative for the bystander, the possessed woman does not experience any such transformation, as she emerges from the ordeal only to return to her original state (Clover, “Opening Up” 98). Lorraine’s storyline evidences this point, as well, as her experience helping Carolyn solidifies her commitment to her career, thus bringing her on a linear journey. In the above ways, *The Conjuring* performs a gender swap on the standard structure described by Clover by rewriting the token bystander as a woman, thus offering modern audiences a more progressive representation of femininity.

In retrospect, my research might have benefited from certain adjustments. A modern text that is more obviously representative of the possession structure might have warranted more compelling evidence of trends within the subgenre. For instance, many might be inclined to categorize *The Conjuring* as a haunted house film. In comparison, films such as *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *The Rite*, and *The Last Exorcism* might seem more typical of the subgenre. However, I do feel that my decision to treat *The Conjuring* as a possession text is justified in that the whole film builds up to the climax of Carolyn’s possession and her subsequent exorcism. The

film also pays great attention to the Warren's qualifications as demonologists, namely their knowledge of possession, their handling of numerous possession cases, and Ed's status as "the only non-ordained person sanctioned by the Catholic Church to perform exorcisms."

Performing an analysis on films in which entities possess both male and female bodies (such as *The Evil Dead* or its 2013 reboot) would likely yield intriguing insights on gender in possession films. Ideally, my analysis would have interrogated representations of male characters as well; however, I chose to focus on female characters in an effort to contain my study. Future research might contribute to the field by examining representational elements among male characters in modern possession films. Finally, the body of research on gender in horror films would greatly benefit from scholarship that considers viewer reception, especially among female audience members. Questions that address how audience members might decode these messages and what effect they stand to have on societal understandings of gender must be asked if we aim to acquire a more complete awareness of the intersection of horror, gender, and film.

Like many films within the possession subgenre, *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist* convey mixed messages regarding the nature of femininity. While these films contain representational elements that contribute to the portrayal of progressive notions of gender, they simultaneously perpetuate binary norms that satisfy a dominant-hegemonic understanding of femininity informed by patriarchy. As Fiske notes, media representations of social constructs, such as race, class, and gender, are often modeled after dominant ideology, and audiences will interpret texts in accordance with this ideology (228). As viewers, we open ourselves up to the media that we consume; we take things in. While it is possible for us to perform subversive readings of dominant ideology, we are likely to be drawn into the representations that we see, thus adopting the dominant perspective. This becomes concerning when such a perspective seemingly

reinforces problematic concepts of gender; in the context of the possession subgenre, we stand to be drawn into an ideology that equates femininity with domesticity, submissiveness, and victimhood. With this in mind, it is worthwhile for us to scrutinize the representational elements of the texts that we consume so as to interrogate the ideological messages that we allow to “get inside.”

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