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Possession: The Struggle for Female Bodily Agency in Exorcism Cinema

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Possession:
the Struggle for Female Bodily Agency in Exorcism Cinema

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Abstract

A dominant trope of the possession genre of horror cinema is the spectacle of the white female body that extends beyond narrowly-proscribed boundaries as being too active, too loud, too sexual, and too uncontrolled. This excess is depicted as monstrous, revolting to patriarchal ideology and in need of containment. In this dissertation, I argue that the long-standing horror genre of possession narratives reveals social anxieties about a loss of control over the productive and reproductive capabilities of the undisciplined female body in U.S. patriarchal, white supremacist, late capitalist culture. This study critically examines three sets of possession films: the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, possessed nun films, and the sole film focusing on a demon-possessed Black woman, *Abby* (1974). Historically and culturally-situated readings demonstrate that these films depict the carefully raced and gendered bodies of women as possessed by patriarchal institutions for the purpose of production and reproduction.

In contrast to previous critical work on women in horror cinema, I read the systems which torment the female body as monstrous, rather than the women themselves and thus avoid reproducing dangerous notions of female abjection. This dissertation demonstrates the utility of an analysis that reads systems of oppression as horrific as doing so illuminates matrices of power in the real world. Understanding the filmic violence as the result of oppressive systems shifts the identification of the antagonist from the possessed woman to the force that limits her power and autonomy. This is more nuanced and more engaged with the complex and intersecting powers of real-world oppression than reading the films as narratives of monstrous rebels or abject monsters who are successfully suppressed.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom,

who made me the person, feminist, and horror film lover I am today.

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Introduction

Mary Magdalene is possessed by the seven deadly sins[1] until she is exorcised, and disciplined, by Jesus in the first cinematic exorcism.

The King of Kings (1927) includes one of the earliest cinematic exorcisms, in which Jesus acts as exorcist to control the excessive body of the prostitute Mary Magdalene by casting demons labeled as the seven deadly sins out of haughty Mary. He controls Mary's body through the power of his gaze and his verbal injunction to "be thou clean." As the sins leave her body, Mary's glamourous updo falls away and her hair jewels disappear through a dissolve. Her character was previously depicted as being sexually free and financially independent, but after the exorcism, she is a servant to Jesus, stripped of wealth and kneeling meekly before him. Her pride is cast out and replaced with utter humility, her posture collapsing as she kneels and kisses the dirty hem of Jesus' robe. She ashamedly covers her exposed body. This exorcism demonstrates Jesus' authority and his power to tame Mary, the embodiment of female sexual excess and independence. Mary becomes the first female follower and the exemplary disciple of Jesus. For one hundred years, many exorcised cinematic girls and women ever since have

followed in Mary's footsteps, renouncing their sexuality and independence, their voices and space, to serve patriarchal authority.

Though their level of popularity has varied over the past century, hundreds of possession films have since been produced around the world, all reflecting the cultures and cultural tensions of the specific socio-historic contexts in which they were created. This study examines a small subset of these films, treating them as artifacts and providing deep readings through a feminist lens sensitive to relations of power and depictions of gender, race, and sexuality. The possession films considered in this dissertation were produced from 1922 to 2018, primarily in the U.S. but also in Europe and Mexico, by both major Hollywood and independent studios, and were all theatrically released. In order to compare artifacts more narratively similar to each other, only films that depict a possessing demon, as opposed to ghost or other force are considered. This narrowing of focus still leaves hundreds of possible films available for consideration and to further limit the scope of this study, three sets of films are examined: the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, possessed nun films, and stories focused on demonically possessed Black women. These three sets of films reveal disparate ideological tensions and merit further critical study of their depictions of gender, sexuality, race, and women's bodily agency. Like the majority of demon possession cinema, these three film sets all focus on possessed female protagonists, making them useful for a feminist examination of women in horror film.

To date, the only book-length study of exorcism cinema is by Olson and Reinhard, in which they read the genre as depicting a rebellious Other being disempowered and subjugated to the social order by male religious authorities. They "argue that within the framework of exorcism cinema, possession consistently grants women, people of color, and queer individuals the power to resist their oppression, while exorcism returns them to a marginalized position within a society

or culture" ending the possessed person's threat to the social order (14). Noting that while there are stories of possessed men, the majority of the films focus on a possessed woman and thus "possession becomes a metaphor for a variety of social anxieties, particularly those regarding puberty, pregnancy, and the mysteries of the female body. Thus, exorcism primarily functions as a way to tame the unruly feminine body and make it more acceptable to society" (177). While this reading is welcome contribution to the paucity of possession film criticism, it is problematic in its reading of torture as (temporary) liberation.

While Olson and Reinhard present a compelling analysis of exorcism films as a metaphor for the disempowerment and oppression of feminized bodies, their reading continues the tradition of viewing monstrosity as liberation. They read the tortured and possessed body (one inhabited and controlled by an external, often explicitly masculine entity) as being liberated. Examining the competing interests struggling for the control of a female body culturally viewed as valuable, porous and inhabitable reveals the suffering women and girls experience under such an ideology. This dissertation analyzes possession films as representing female struggle for bodily autonomy and the possessing demon as the cultural tensions repressing her. Women are tormented not as a condition of liberation but by the contradictory demands of white supremacist patriarchal culture: to be mythically prepregnant while also biologically not pregnant, simultaneously pure and purely of spirit while also profane and embodied, and to be always sexually available to white men while also demonstrating Black respectability.

My reading points to the torture of the possessed females as a representation of their abuse in the real-world. Connecting a concern for the reality of lived experiences to popular discourse is a fundamental tenet of cultural studies, as developed by Stuart Hall. Throughout his career, Hall demonstrated that discourse shapes reality and identity, and is at once

representational and constructive. Hall further argues that fictional narratives can act as myths, showing audiences resolutions to contradictions and tensions like those listed above that are impossible in the real world (15). In demonic possession films, supernaturally powered exorcisms resolve the contradictions created by the demands of racist, sexist ideologies and institutions for tormented women, reinforcing the authority of religion to control female bodies. As Jane Ussher has demonstrated in her cultural and psychological study, "Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body," discourse, including possession fiction (52), shapes how women experience and relate to their own bodies. Ussher's findings make clear the need for further and more nuanced study of possession cinema, especially a critical position sympathetic to the possessed women.

The rape-like possession of female characters who are helpless to move from "victim" to "survivor" under their own agency is a poor metaphor for rebellion. It is far more productive to read possession, rather than the possessed, as monstrous and the state of possession as an oppression of bodily autonomy. This study calls for readings of systems of oppression, rather than female bodies, as abject. These systems are not confined to the cinematic world but are instead reproduced by real world institutions of medicine and religion and are constitutive of gender ideology.

Cynthia Freeland's work on horror films grounds my analytical methodology. She recommends an analysis grounded in both the social sciences and humanities, drawing on film studies, literature, anthropology, sociology and history. Freeland argues for treating a film as an artifact and, first, locating the film in its cultural, literary and historical context and second, analyzing its representational contents and practices. This dissertation considers the films in the socio-cultural contexts in which they were produced, paying especial attention to contemporary

discourses surrounding women's bodily autonomy in the fields of public health and religion. Freeland further notes that as a feminist reader, the critic should specifically "scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between the sexes" (204). Through close readings of possession films that are focused on these three elements, this dissertation creates the first grounded feminist analysis of the subgenre. The questions I answer about the possession films include: how does the film depict women and are women actors or acted upon? How do the formal elements of the film present gender roles and relations? Are historic or genre precedents referenced? How is the possession plot of *The Exorcist* reproduced or challenged? What gender ideology is presupposed and is a challenge offered? This final question is particularly useful in looking at films produced over a span of almost one hundred years. Finally, utilizing Luce Irigaray's strategies of deconstructive reading, what does a "deep" reading, looking below representation to gaps, presumptions and repressions, yield? A primary gap located in possession cinema is the absence of Black women, which is discussed in the last chapter through an analysis of the only film that features an African American woman who is possessed, *Abby* (1974). Abby's singular position suggests different cultural anxieties regarding loss of control over and access to white and Black women's bodies. As neither a film franchise, like *Paranormal Activity,* or a subgenre, like possessed nuns, *Abby* is considered in relation to other films centering on Black women, as well as the historical and religious context in which the film was produced.

This study shows that exorcism cinema is more complicated than Olney and Reinhard suggest. These films depict the complex and intersecting identities of gender, race and sexuality as they are created, defined, and disciplined under capitalist patriarchy. As Silvia Federici notes "…regardless of what other labors we had to perform, *procreation and sexual service to men have always been expected of us and often forced upon us"* (emphasis original; *Beyond the*

Periphery 23). The requirement of providing both freely accessed sexual pleasure and legitimate heirs is contradictory and pulls the body of the possessed in two opposing directions as the young woman's social value is negotiated. Rarely in this struggle is the woman or girl herself in agentic rebellion or able to decide her own future.[2] She loses control over her own body, which is never truly her own in a patriarchal system.

A dominant trope of possession cinema is the spectacle of the white female body that extends beyond narrowly-proscribed boundaries as being too active, too loud, too sexual, and too uncontrolled. This excess is depicted as monstrous, revolting to patriarchal ideology and in need of containment. Though sin-full Mary Magdalene was possibly the earliest exorcised cinematic character, the most famous film exorcism was performed on demon-inhabited Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist* (1973), one of the highest-grossing horror films of all time. This film's financial success spawned numerous domestic and international imitators immediately after its release, as well as two sequels, two prequels, a television series by the FOX Network (2016-2017), and a film trilogy under development, with an initial release date of 2023. Possession films have not lost their popular appeal and new versions of the possession story, updated as gender expectations and filmic trends change, still draw in audiences. Ten popular possession novels[3] and over thirty films[4] have been released in the last decade revealing how popular this subgenre remains. With few exceptions, the narratives feature a white cisgender girl or woman being invaded by a demonic entity and being saved, when she able to be redeemed, by a religiously empowered man. This pattern exposes cultural values regarding sex, gender, race, and power. The success of this formula over fifty years suggests its enduring appeal and legibility to audiences, making it worthy of further study.

In this dissertation, I argue that possession narratives, a film genre nearly one hundred years old, reveal social anxieties about a loss of control over the productive and reproductive capabilities of the undisciplined female body in U.S. patriarchal, white supremacist, late capitalist culture. The possessed woman's or girl's loss of verbal, physical and psychological control signifies her body's removal from the patriarchal social order. A possessed female body by definition resists its order, control, and useful behavior. Since female bodies are necessary to reproduce workers and the possessed body is non-utilitarian, the possessed female thus threatens patriarchy and the economic system. The race of the possessed is significant and the predominance of white women and girls helps define whiteness as under attack from dangerous Others, while the gendered racism in a depiction of a possessed Black women defines Blackness as hypersexual and in need of familial and religious control. Regardless of race, these bodies disrupt families and societies, disrespect authority, and present a physical challenge to the beliefs and control of men. In possession films, male authority figures struggle to rid the possessed of the demon, putting even their own lives at risk, in order to return control over the woman or girl's body to the disciplining agencies of biomedicine, religion, institutional racism, and economic control. The exorcist-priest is the main active agent in the contest for bodily control, reinforcing the power of the patriarchy over the products of the fecund female body. While he is represented as the protagonist in his story of redemption, he is antagonistic to the possessed. Though he frees her from the invading demon, he represents patriarchal religion and reinserts her into that institution's matrices of control.

Religion acts as the representative institution of patriarchy in many of these films, controlling the female body while promising relief from the deprivations of invading demons. Religious control comes in the form of exclusively male church hierarchy and strict proscriptions

on behavior. This control is simultaneously justified by the discursive construction of women as morally weak, sexually dangerous, the source of original sin, and cause for expulsion from paradise. These characteristics make women a threat to men, who are considered more spiritually focused and pure. Protecting men from dangerous women is enacted through covering women's bodies and regulating their speech and action. All of these proscriptions limit the space women are allowed to take up, be it visual, aural, or physical. Possessed women take up excessive space, threatening both male purity and domination. Uncontrolled, possessed women threaten their possible future children, families, communities, and the priests and church who attempt to exorcise them. In Christian ideology, the center of this expanding circle of unrest is the excessive female body. Possession films demonstrate the potential danger of the female body and both how and why religion must dominate that body. Further, they depict exorcised women and girls as grateful for the control religion provides, as reinsertion into religious institutions is their only path to spiritual redemption, a goal of greater value than earthly liberation.

Possession films demonstrate that female bodily rebellion can only be quelled by the Christian god and his priest. The narratives follow an assumption made by the exorcists that if they fail to de- and repossess her body, she is doomed (from their perspective) to spiritual and physical destruction. "Rescued" possessed girls appear after exorcism as docile and grateful to their priestly saviors, passive victims who cannot recall most of what happened to them. Their suffering and struggle while inhabited by the demon results only in temporary frenzy; all return to the disciplined object position they held pre-possession. Emptied of the invading demon, they are prepared instead for a future of productive paid and unpaid labor, patriarchally-sanctioned and heteronormative sexuality, and reproductive labor. Exorcised of demons, possession victims are re-victimized through totalizing and permanent possession by a male-dominated society. The

plight of the demon-possessed protagonists, then, has significance for all women. As exaggerated or hyperbolic depictions of the plight of women in a male-dominated society, possessed women appear as warnings to those who would resist patriarchy. The temporary removal from religious control results in physical suffering and abuse.

While the demon possessed female body is presented as a spectacle of suffering, reading these films closely reveals the mechanisms controlling women's bodies. Using deep readings sympathetic to the abused female bodies, this study explores three differing sets of possession films to explore how this genre reveals and reproduces the disciplining of the female body to maintain access to its sexual, productive and reproductive labor, an access threatened by the demonic invasion and bodily chaos of conflicting demands. This study is concerned with female suffering and relations of power between the possessed and the possessor, whether the possessor is a demon or ideological or institutional mechanisms of control.

In contrast to previous critical studies of possession horror films and the presence of monstrous females within them, this dissertation employs a feminist lens that examines multiple arenas of discourse about the female body. I employ a multi-disciplinary analysis drawing on the social sciences as well as humanities, an approach which sets this study apart from much of the existing literature that focuses on concepts of monstrosity and/or abjection from literary studies. Each of these disciplines provide another method of contextualizing the films and illuminating parallel contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality, race, and power. The benefit of this approach is two-fold. First, additional perspectives provide more in-depth and defensible readings of the films. Second, the films and shifting ideologies they depict are more clearly situated in relationship to each other and to cultural change.

Social science studies in public health, history, religious studies, and anthropology are relied on in this study to widen the analytical lens. Public health discourse on reproduction, especially as explored by Miranda Waggoner, informs my reading of the *Paranormal Activity* films. Medieval to recent history are incorporated into all three chapters, providing specific contexts for each of the films discussed. Work from the field of religious studies focused on Catholicism and the many varieties of U.S. Black Christian churches is utilized in chapters two and three. Hans Baer's work on Black churches as sites of resistance is especially important to the latter. My own training in cultural anthropology undoubtably influences the analysis and conclusions made throughout this study.

While focused on different films than the ones analyzed here, previous scholarship on women in horror cinema provides the foundation for this study, especially that on maternal or menstruating female bodies. Much scholarship on maternal horror has focused specifically on the plight of white women carrying demonic pregnancies and on monstrous, abject mothers or mother-figures. These readings often position the fecund body as inherently monstrous and the films as reinforcing violent rejection of the feminine (Fischer on *Rosemary's Baby* (1968); Wilson and Jackson on monstrosity created via technology; Arnold, Kristeva, Creed, and Badley on the excessively and abjectly porous female body). Rather than focusing on the image of the monstrous feminine, this study seeks to illuminate the forces which produce or impose monstrosity on the female body. In doing so, I follow Karyn Valerius' work on *Rosemary's Baby*, read as a cautionary tale for reproductive choice, and Brandon Grafius' reading of *Inside* (2007) as reflecting destructive cultural constructions of motherhood. Valerius and Grafius utilize horror films as tools to illuminate cultural practices and ideology detrimental to women's agency.

Critical work on menstruation in horror also provides a foundation for this study, concerned as it is with leaking, fecund female bodies. As this study is also concerned with women in the real world I reject the position held by Briefel, Clover, and Lindsey who problematically erase female viewers in their critiques by assuming a universally male viewer, one unable to identify with and oppositional to a menstruating female monster. Following bell hooks, I instead reject a critical position which requires and is founded on a monolithic, dominant audience. While each provide different readings of the werewolf coming of age film *Ginger Snaps* (2000), Miller, Pulliam, and Nielsen all employ close readings of the film to explore discourses around menstruation and female adolescence, recognizing the complexities of power, oppression, and rebellion that are depicted in the film. I utilize their approach by similarly examining how the discursive construction of the fecund body shapes the lived experience of biological realities. As Barker, Mathijs and Mendik demonstrate in their study of fan reception of *Ginger Snaps,* it is a particularly useful film for thinking about gender and identity and fans are aware of and engaged with the film around these issues. Keeping feminist films like *Ginger Snaps* and *Rosemary's Baby* (according to Valerius' reading) in mind while viewing demonic possession cinema provides a critical reminder to look for what is missing and who's voice is missing in the text. Ginger and Rosemary voice their feelings, fears, and desires, while possessed women and girls are often unable to do more than blaspheme and beg for help. Reading the body of the possessed, potential mother works both to fill in a gap in the feminist scholarship on horror and to offer an alternative to seeing fecund female bodies as inherently monstrous.

What scholarly work on the monstrous feminine as depicted in horror often lacks, however, is a direct connection to other discourses of *abjectification,* as defined by Julia Kristeva, in culture which re/produce the same ideology and manifest it as validation of

religious, sexual and medical control of real women's bodies. With the exception of Fischer's and Valerius' studies of *Rosemary's Baby* and Munford and Waters critique of *American Horror Story,* scholarly work on demonic pregnancy fails to address the potential horror of a loss of reproductive rights and bodily agency for women. Films concerning demonic possession demonstrate the struggle for control over women's bodies, the potential value of those bodies and who has legitimate access to female biopower. Demonic possession films, like maternal and pregnancy horror, reveal the ideological struggle for bodily control and make monstrous the untamed, unproductive female body. Reading possession films can make visible the abject institutions and ideologies which torment the female body in the real world.

Much of feminist film criticism of pregnancy and maternal horror has been rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, an approach problematic for its erasure of the nuances of race, class, and historical specificity. This study builds on earlier psychoanalytically informed work but advocates movement towards a different approach, incorporating a wider range of disciplines. Pioneers in the field like Carol Clover and Barbara Creed built upon Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze and the position of women in film as spectacular and sexual objects, presented for male pleasure and defined by their to-be-looked-at-ness. Focusing specifically on the slasher film, Clover explores the relationship between the presumably male audience, the female "final girl" heroines, and the male monsters. The complex connections between the audience and these two types of characters collapse the gender binary during the film while ultimately reinstating it, and the patriarchal ideology of male supremacy, by the film's conclusion. Clover argues that slasher film victims are feminine bodies and thus a male audience cannot recognize themselves within victim characters. The hero of the slasher, in Clover's original terminology, the "final girl," is a masculine female, as is reinforced by her name, status as an unpenetrated virgin, and

her appropriation of a symbolic phallus to defeat the monster. In slasher films, patriarchal culture is not threatened by a triumphant woman as it is ultimately phallic power that resolves the horrific situation. Freudian readings like this have the potential to erase the female body, rather than illuminating or challenging the forces which attack it. This study brings critical attention back to the female body and, rather than reading it as male in disguise, it focuses on those institutions which make monstrous demands on that body. These institutions include medicine and religion and vary over time. These variations and complexities are present in possession cinema.

Though important in the lineage of feminist criticism of horror films, I necessarily reject Creed's construction of the monstrous feminine and her reliance on Kristevan notions of abjection and rejection of the maternal body as dangerous for real women. Like Clover, Creed also reads horror films as reproducing patriarchal culture. In her analysis, horror films depict the patriarchal fear of female sexual difference and its "Otherness." Otherness is defeated in the films and phallic power again triumphs. Contrary to Clover, Creed reads human women as monsters, feminized not only as a result of their gender, but even more powerfully, through their bodies' metamorphoses and secretions. Following Kristeva, she locates much of horror's abjection in audience disgust at leaking and boundary-transgressing bodies. Like the menstruating and lactating female body, monstrous bodies secrete fluids and are thus coded as feminine. In possession films, bodies inhabited by demons also secrete; in *The Exorcist,* for example, Regan urinates on the carpet, vomits, bleeds, and spits. Rather than connecting these secretions to a monstrosity inherent in the female body, a dangerous concept for the safety of real women's bodies (Tyler 77), I read the secretions as evidence of the characters' rejection of the tightly controlled female body to produce labor and reproduce laborers. Further moving away

from Creed and Kristeva, I read abjection as located in the institutions and ideologies which torment women and not as an inherent trait of femaleness.

While feminist use of psychoanalytic theory to interpret horror film has its merits, it is limited by its reliance on a psychologically monolithic audience. This theory also operates by a set of principles based on an interpretation of a patriarchal, historically distant (late Victorian), racially limited (white), class-based construct reliant on biased observations of women deemed hysterical. Psychological science has moved away from psychoanalytic theory after decades of research and revision and so must film studies.

Scholarship about possession films focuses primarily on *The Exorcist* and rarely uses a feminist lens. *The Exorcist* is a complex text, fascinating for its polysemy as well as its revolutionary violence and vast influence. Kermode accurately notes: "Yet for all its shocking power, the film is an insolvable riddle, a masterful amalgam of contradictory themes that maintains a tension between the divine and the depraved, the progressive and the regressive, the hidden and the apparent" (8). The film is still the subject of scholarly concern, nearly fifty years after its release, with a new call for papers released during this writing. If horror films express cultural nightmares and fears, *The Exorcist*, its precursors, and the many possession films that followed it deserve feminist critical analysis.

Because of its cultural dominance, any discussion of possession films benefits by beginning with *The Exorcist* as many of the films made after it are either close adaptations or strongly influenced by it. Screenwriter William Peter Blatty has stated that he wrote his novel of the same name, published two years before the film was released, with the intention of reviving belief and making "a positive statement about God, the human condition and the relationship between the two" (*William*). In doing so, Blatty was reviving the biblical and medieval

hagiographical traditions of using the exorcism narrative as a demonstration of divine power and the legitimacy of the priesthood to wield it to control excessive bodies. However, Blatty's novel had predecessors. One is a 1962 possession novel, *The Case Against Satan* by Ray Russell, that preceded Blatty's novel by nine years and was republished in 2015 as a "Penguin Classic." Though this text is also foundational to the possession genre, discussion of it is absent from scholarship. No critic has identified the relevance of the similarities and differences between this earlier novel and *The Exorcist.* Blatty has never publicly cited the novel as a direct source but the many similarities between this novel and Blatty's reveal the same gendered *zeitgeist*, if not direct literary inspiration.

As he wrote *The Exorcist*, Blatty kept and consulted newspaper clippings about a 1949 real-life exorcism case of a young boy given the pseudonym "Roland Doe." Jesuit priests in St. Louis, Missouri spent months in 1949 performing the rites of exorcism on 14-year-old "Roland Doe," from a working class neighborhood in Maryland. Roland's alleged possession began after playing with an Ouija board given to him by his aunt, whose recent death had greatly upset the boy. As in the movie and novel, symptoms included strange noises from the attic, the mattress shaking, verbal outbursts, violent attacks on attending priests, and words appearing, scratched out on the skin of the possessed. However, Blatty changed key details of the case. Examining the changes Blatty made from the source reveal Blatty's focus on a feminine/masculine dichotomy, also present in Russell's novel. In contrast to the Roland Doe case, both novels feature possessed girls, instead of boys, and the central character is the male exorcist. The possessed girl is merely a spectacle of suffering the exorcist must endure in order to find redemption. The alterations made to the details of the 1949 exorcism emphasize the discursive creation of gendered, disciplined bodies.

Blatty (and Russell) crucially changed the sex of the victim from male to female, making the possessed more acceptable as a victim in need of saving and a body more available to penetration by a demon. The family is also changed from a working-class married couple to an affluent, working, single mother and distant, disinterested father, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Blatty's change in family structure to an adolescent girl with an absent father and working mother puts they blame for the possession on the parents. Within a patriarchal ideology which situates daughters as in need of protection in order to stay pure, Regan is in greater physical, moral and sexual danger without proper paternal oversight. The daughter's danger threatens both her natal family and her future as a mother, i.e., in her role of reproducing the labor force.

In contrast to the possessed girl who must be reclaimed for future motherhood, the priestly savior, who dominates and disciplines her in his superior position, inhabits a position valuable for his work (instead of just his body) and is allowed a dynamic character arc as the central figure in the story. The novels focus on the suffering of a doubting priest forced to confront demons. Priestly exorcists demonstrate the masculine opportunity for personal, active redemption after failure, in contrast to the passive redemption through the actions of others experienced by possessed girls. This pattern appears in subsequent possession films, including *The Case Against Satan.* Like Father Karras in *The Exorcist*, Father Gregory Sargent, the reluctant exorcist of *The Case Against Satan* (1962), questions why he is the one who must "drive out a medieval Devil I have trouble believing in" (51). His Bishop tells him that "It is the only thing that can dispel your doubt, the only thing that can save you," explaining that this possession is part of a larger plan (51). Gregory and Karras struggle against demons to restore their own weakened faith, emerging restored in their calling and the heroes of the narrative, far more important than the passive physical suffering of the possessed girl.

Helpless in their own salvation, the possessed girls in the novels are physically tortured in the cause of spiritual salvation for their exorcists. The possessed are objects not just for the demon but also the male priests. During the exorcism, Father Gregory laments "Oh dear Jesus, Why? Why to me? Why did this have to happen to me? What did I do..." (100). In *The Exorcist*, Fathers Karras and Merrin discuss Regan's possession not in terms of the torment the girl suffers but as a test of faith for those around her. The body of the possessed girl is not her own; it is a prize for the victor in the struggle between priest and demon, a physical symbol of the contest for belief in god's power and goodness. Once the struggle is won by the exorcist, the girl is shown to be once again obedient, quiet, and, though wounded, physically normal. Regan is quiet and obediently follows her mother to a waiting car, ready to leave the site of her excess and move into the future. She pauses only to chastely kiss the priest on the cheek, showing her gratitude to the patriarchal institution that expelled the demon. She is ready and her body is purified for future motherhood, feminine-gendered (and often invisible) work and legitimate sexual activity.

Sexuality, and especially the tension between legitimate and illegitimate female sexual activity, is also at the center of Susan's possession in *The Case Against Satan.* The novel includes a vague incest and rape subtext that Blatty does not include in his novel. The priest-exorcist repeatedly wonders whether Susan is truly possessed or if she is acting out as a result of repressing the memory of her father possibly raping her. He considers a sexual assault as a possible cause of Susan's changed behavior. She quickly transitions from being a sweet, obedient girl to foul-mouthed, avoiding churches, and stripping in front of, and then attacking, a priest. Though neither characters nor audience ever know for certain, Gregory suspects that Susan's father has raped her, in part because her mother died, and this presumably leaves Susan vulnerable to her father's resulting sexual frustration.

The Case Against Satan ends with a final, unambiguous statement on the value of Susan's body as her entire worth, reinforcing her role as a future provider of sexual pleasure within marriage and the value of the body the exorcist was fighting to reclaim. Months after the exorcism, Gregory calls Susan at the church-run boarding school where she now resides, and she tells him of her plan to go to medical school. Father Gregory discourages her from this goal, telling her that she is too pretty, as well as predicting that "some young male med student might try hard to change your mind. If he does –don't fight too hard" (134). In giving such advice, Gregory reinforces Susan's value as a sexual object for male pleasure and her ideal vocation as wife and mother. Freed of the demon, or illegitimate sexual use by her father, Susan's body is emptied and prepared for appropriately gendered service. While other narratives aren't as overt in the prescription of subordinate wife and mother for the now un-possessed protagonist, this idea defines the battle of the priests for control of the females. Exorcism prepares women and girls for their future value as reproducers and as producers of sexual labor.

Blatty's novel and the subsequent film adaptation present both the possession and exorcism as violent, sexual and gendered. *The Exorcist* established the formula of a young female body as a violent spectacle of distress, out of control, white, and sexually explicit. Its 2000 theatrical re-release was lauded for its reinstatement of at brief sequence cut from the first film of possessed 12-year-old Regan MacNeil's excessive body quickly spider-walking down the stairs of her home, upside down, and revealing a gaping, bloody mouth in a screen close-up at the base of the stairs. As a long-time horror movie buff, nothing I had ever seen in hundreds of hours of film had ever repulsed and horrified me as much as those few seconds of watching Regan racing monstrously down the stairs. Fright at the strange movement was matched by disgust at her brazen display of a bleeding orifice where her vagina would have been, in natural

movement. A few minutes later, this horror was topped by the extreme discomfort of seeing Regan masturbate/mutilate herself with a crucifix. Both of these scenes rely on the horror of watching an innocent girl's body performing grotesque, sexualized actions, a mockery of normal human motion and sexuality resulting in self-harm, compelled and controlled by a malevolent horror within, struggling for control. Cut by director William Friedkin against Blatty's wishes,[5] the restored scene, with its emphasis on the possessed body as outside the realm of normal production and reproduction, increased the horror for audiences during the rerelease by adding something new and unexpected. By 2000, this graphic emphasis on female sexuality run amok was a completely legible element in the possession genre.

Though *The Exorcist* is one of most frequently discussed horror films in academic literature, all of the previous work lacks a consideration of the gendered power dynamics present in the narrative and the ideological mechanisms of white supremacist patriarchal control they illuminate. Diverse readings have been produced and a variety of critical lenses have been employed in studying the film, however, nearly all of them are blind to the gender dynamics of the film. Numerous critics ignore the inescapable issue of gender in the film (Gans, Frentz and Farrell, Schober, Fry, Packer, Jackson, Geary, Kawin, Cade, and Kinder and Houston). Olney, Humphrey and Scahill approach the issues of gender by providing queer readings of the film, but none consider the significance of Regan's femaleness. Krzywinska considers "the relationship between the demonic and masculinity" (35), reading possession, werewolf and techno-possession films as enacting the drama of the male Oedipal relationship. While the importance of gender and Regan's status as a female is considered by some critics (Sara Williams, Tony Williams, Briefel, Hanson, Magistrale, Marriott and Schober), my dissertation develops the issue of gender beyond what is explored by these earlier readings.

Reading the film as part of the subgenre of female possession films demonstrates crucial continuities in these films. The possessed character in need of saving is consistently female. Both her possessor and exorcist are male and these two characters fight for control over her body. Religious control over female bodies is reiterated in film after film. Similarly, ideological forces concerned with concepts of reproductive control and value related to the fecund female body are repeated in possession films made decades apart. Previous exploration of these patterns is missing from the critical corpus.

Also neglected in the critical literature is a consideration of how possession films construct the idea of whiteness as a category both of high value and as under threat from non-whiteness. As Helen Young notes in her study of popular fantasy literature, creating white characters is, while influenced by the historical dominance of white authors and audiences in genre fiction, a choice. She notes that "habit/convention/genre is not static…even a choice made without conscious thought is still a choice; acts of change *and* repetition require agency. Using a genre convention which inscribes Whiteness into a creative work or imagined world is as much about race as rejecting or subverting that same convention" (6). Hall similarly notes the importance of what is not being said about race in popular culture (15) and Kinitra Brooks calls attention to the "absent presence of black women in the horror genre" (*Sycorax* 8). While the film industry has always been and continues to be dominated by white creators, the impact of this dominance on the stories told (and not told) has not often been explored by scholars of horror cinema. Kevin Wetmore's Fanonian reading of *The Exorcist* franchise provides a rare example of considering Whiteness in possession horror films. Fanon argues that colonialism is pure violence and that the colonizer lives in fear of the colonized learning and repeating the violence inflicted on them. Wetmore observes that "This Fanonian tension manifests itself in

horror films in the form of an invading African spirit taking over the body of a Euro-American person, usually but not always a young white woman. Fear is created by the premise of an African doing to a Westerner what the West has been doing to Africans" (886). While the threat of "an invading African spirit" is not present in every demonic possession film, every demonic possession film does work to define Whiteness in some manner. With the exception of *Abby* in chapter three, all of the texts discussed in this study feature possessed white women. The overwhelming whiteness of possession reveals cultural fears over loss of control over white women's bodies, especially as it relates to reproductive futurity and labor. Also made visible is the complimentary lack of fear over losing control over Black women's bodies, still very much controlled by dominant white supremacist institutions and ideology.

While *The Exorcist* has spawned a critical corpus, other demonic possession films have rarely appeared in scholarship, even that not focused on race in horror films. Exceptions are Casey Ryan Kelly's insightful work on *Possession,* in which he reads the film in terms of oppressive purity culture, and Munford and Waters, who read the genre as representing the evils of abortion and the need for strong religious patriarchs to save misguided girls. Other readings have focused on technologically possessed men and European possession films, a subgenre with greater radical potential than most U.S examples.[6] Krzywinska considers possessed nun films from multiple genres, noting their "common engagement with the imagined effects of sexual repression on the chaste nun" (1) in medievalist settings with narratives based on pop Freudian psychoanalysis and medieval demonology. In chapter two, I build on Krzywinska's work by showing religious institutional control creating tensions beyond sexual desire in the body of the nun and how recent films connect to the long tradition of the gothic bleeding nun.

Using the critical frame developed by Valerius in her reading of *Rosemary's Baby*, chapter one examines the focus on maternity in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and the concurrent anti-choice public health policy of advocating for the promotion of fetal over maternal health before pregnancy occurs, whether it is planned, desired or otherwise. Generations of possessed white women and girls in the film franchise experience the surveillance and disciplining required to keep their energies and productivity focused on the reproduction of sons. The result of the horrific treatment of women's bodies is the destruction of women, men, and entire families. With no happy ending and no triumph by any human character, the films can be read as an exposé of the excessive surveillance of women's bodies and the obsession with the health of the phantom fetus they are being readied for in the reproduction of white citizens. The possessions in this series are centered around maternity and attempts to dispel the demons are primarily technological. This is in contrast to the non-reproductive and religious paranormal events in the subgenre of demonically possessed nuns, a plot device used from the silent era to the present.

Chapter two focuses on the pattern of bleeding and possessed nuns, a trope of late nineteenth century gothic literature and continuing to the present in new horror films, and the control and exploitation by the Catholic Church of their non-reproductive bodies for sexual and productive labor. Focusing on a different set of films than Krzywinska, namely those more focused on horrific possession and priestly exorcisms, I build on her observation that possessed nuns offer the spectacle of erotic voyeurism and consider the productive value denied the church when convents are in dis-order. Nuns, as ideally never becoming pregnant, present a possible critique for the conclusions of the first chapter and the focus on possession as reclaiming female bodies for the reproduction of the labor force. Instead, a close reading suggests that possessed

fictional nuns, like nuns in the real-world, are controlled and disciplined for continued access to their unpaid labor in hospitals, churches, missions, and as sex-objects for Catholic clergy. In addition to the medievalist setting of the films presenting history as "a form of pornography" as space for sexual deviance (Krzywinska 30), it also writes the era as exclusively white, investing Whiteness with historical legitimacy.

Continuing the importance of religion as an institution of control over female bodies, chapter three examines in-depth the blaxploitation imitation of *The Exorcist, Abby*, a highly successful film at its release, though it has since been neglected. The film is considered in the context of Black religious life, the agency of Black women in horror films and the historical domination of Black bodies under white supremacist U.S. capitalism. Abby's possession and release are deeply embedded in contemporary notions of proper Black womanhood within the Black Christian church, as well as the influence of polytheistic religions from the African diaspora. I also consider how Abby stands in contrast to powerful Black female characters in other blaxploitation horror films, as well as *The Exorcist,* which it closely imitates.

Despite their overtly horrific and apparently anti-female narratives, possession films offer viewers and critics an opportunity to examine struggles to control women's bodies. A distinct subset of the horror genre, the films merit critical scrutiny as a site of resistance and reinscription of women's bodies. As these films reflect their cultural context, their settings illuminate specific contestation of women's rights to control their own pregnant bodies, from conception to birth. The possessed nun films address the exploitation of these virginal women by an institution that purports to protect them. And finally, *Abby,* a movie that is unique, raises the issue of race, present throughout possession films, explicitly. My study of possession films demonstrates that the films share a common progenitor, *The Exorcist,* but that their differences from this film allow

them to comment more concretely on multiple sites of women's oppression, including the Catholic church and the Black Christian church. That *Abby*, the final film discussed in this dissertation, also comments on blaxploitation, another film subset, points to the ways that popular film engages in dialogue about race and gender. The demons and exorcists of these films have their mirrors in the real world where white supremacist patriarchal structures seek to control and possess the bodies of women and girls in the real world.

Chapter 1

Perinatal Activity: Discourses of Anticipatory Motherhood and Phantom Fetuses

Visibility is a trap.

-Foucault (*Discipline and Punish* 200)

Leila prepares to help facilitate the birth of the demon, Toby, in *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (2015).[7] As all the characters in the series serve a phantom fetus, the *Paranormal Activity* film series serves as a feminist fable, warning of the dangers of preconception ideology.

Anxieties surrounding white women's identity, autonomy, and motherhood are frequently expressed in horror films about demonic pregnancies,[8] and this subgenre has been examined in the critical literature. For example, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), one of the most popular horror films of all time, is often discussed, with widely divergent conclusions reached on the film's ideological message. Rosemary's desire to become pregnant is coopted by those she trusts most, secretly members of a Satanic coven, and she is drugged by them and impregnated by the devil. The most politically useful feminist analysis of *Rosemary's Baby* is undertaken by Karyn

Valerius, who reads the film as a cautionary tale of the misappropriation of a woman's body and reproductive powers; she analyzes the film as a reminder of the fallacy of independent fetal personhood, as argued for in anti-choice rhetoric. Rosemary's husband, doctors, and elderly neighbors plot against her, usurping her reproductive power and, in the end, force her to assume an undesirable mothering role. Until almost the end of the film, many of Rosemary's experiences are little different from those of many pregnant women, leading the viewer to realize how scary everyday maternal control and gaslighting really are.

As a rich, polysemic text, *Rosemary's Baby* may easily be approached as a boon or curse when viewed through a feminist critical lens. Valerius considers it as a feminist fable, open to use in pro-woman and pro-choice discourses, and as a tool to demonstrate the increasingly conservative ideology surrounding reproductive rights. Her critical frame helps situate the discourse of anticipatory motherhood and the surveillance of women as mothers, and I apply it in my reading of the possessed and observed women and girls of the *Paranormal Activity* film franchise.

The Panoptic Power of Public Health, Found-Footage and the Demonic

The *Paranormal Activity* films can be read as a feminist fable that argues against preconception ideology as they present numerous aspects and implications of the concept in nightmarish, exaggerated form, detrimental to both men and women. Produced at the same time as the initial 2005 release of the U.S. Surgeon General's guidelines for prepregnant behavior through the 2013 release of the revised marketing campaign, it is unlikely that they were consciously created in dialogue with public healthcare policy. However, like Valerius' reading of *Rosemary's Baby*, feminist critics may adopt them in the ongoing project of dissecting and

dismantling anti-choice rhetoric. The films were certainly made in the same cultural environment that led to the guidelines and thus echo the anxieties of time.

The *Paranormal Activity* films, taken as a whole, present as maternal surveillance and anticipatory motherhood as a dangerous ideology which creates a nightmare of oppression, disciplining, and violence harmful to women and men. The film series appeared at the same time as the idea of preconception began to receive legal validity and, as I will show, the films reflect the same cultural moment of increased intrusion into personal life and technological shifts towards increased surveillance. Using the found-footage filmmaking style, the film franchise documents the destruction not only of women's autonomy but of entire multi-generational families when maternalist ideology, in the interest of potential future pregnancies, prioritizes maintaining women's well-being as vessels for fetuses, even when it is to their personal detriment. Men in the series spending their energies engaged in another paternalistic project, specifically, filming the women they see themselves as owners of. This concern for future pregnancies is focused on white women, as reproducers of legitimate citizens in white supremacist culture. Never does the franchise include possessed women of color and the only possessed men in the series are Latino, valued primarily for their role as physical labor in a cult's army.

Foucault's work on panopticism provides a foundation for reading and understanding the use of surveillance in both the film series and preconception ideology. Like the inmates in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon architecture that Foucault analyzes, women in film and preconception are always available for observation by an unseen, unapproachable authority: "[the inmate] is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (*Discipline* 200). Bentham's architectural design allows for a single, hidden

observer to view at will a large number of isolated inmates. The inmates do not know if they are under observation at any specific moment so they internalize the observer, enacting the power dynamic because of the knowledge of possibility of being observed, and subsequently disciplined. The found-footage format of the films allows the audience to intensely see and gather information from what is recorded, but the viewed subject cannot speak back to the viewer and indeed does not know the extent of their surveillance. Additionally, it is only men in the series who control the viewing technologies, placing them in the position of power as guardians and jailers of the women they watch. The invisible demon also acts as an additional level of surveillance. Characters rarely are certain whether the demon is present and watching at the moment, but they are aware that he might be. They struggle to view the demon, but consistently fail to do so. Knowing they are being watched, the women internalize the disciplining gaze of both the men in their lives and the demon that haunts them and conform their behavior to the expectations of these watchers. Camera and demon serve as architectural apparatus and replace the Panopticon as "machine[s] for dissociating the see/being seen dyad" (*Discipline* 202) extending patriarchal control beyond the limited capacity of a merely human guardian. Similarly, preconception ideology appoints medical professionals as guardians and, through public health campaigns and questions asked during interactions in medical settings, induces women to self-surveil themselves to prepare their bodies as suitable vessels for potential pregnancies.

The *Paranormal Activity* films were produced beginning in 2007, two years after the beginning of the U.S. Surgeon General's public health campaign focused on the promotion of preconception health for women, with the most recent film being released in 2015. Filmed as a found-footage horror film with a minimal cast and crew, having a production budget of only

$15,000, the first film had a worldwide gross of over $193 million ("Paranormal Activity"). This film sparked a wave of imitators and hundreds of found-footage horror films have subsequently been released, while even films made with more traditional narrative techniques have incorporated found-footage scenes. Many of the found-footage horror films made after *Paranormal Activity* have been possession narratives.[9] Coupled with surveillance horror, like the *Saw* series (2004-present), a major trend in 21st century horror film has been audience participation in a diegetic panopticon of fear which explicitly reminds viewers of the act of viewing horror.

The financial success of *Paranormal Activity* (2007) inspired five sequels and expanded an innovatively filmed and promoted, low budget, haunted house/possession horror film into a franchise. Directed by Oren Peli and well received by audiences and critics alike, the success of the franchise drove the early success of production company Blumhouse, which has since produced successful horror films like *Get Out* and also includes an independent television studio. The first film is shot in found-footage style and takes place entirely in a young, unmarried couple's home in a middle-class neighborhood in California. Subsequent films take place in other homes, as well as sites of everyday activities: a child's soccer game, local shops, a neighbor's yard. Budgets increased substantially from the first to final film but the method of storytelling has remained similar, even as the use of special effects has increased.

The incredible success of the first film, despite its low budget and amateur production, has generated interest in its cultural meanings in academic literature, primarily with a focus on socio-economic readings. The film focuses on the increasingly violent supernatural events troubling a young couple, Katie and Micah, in their suburban home as a demon stalks and eventually possesses Katie. Made just before the housing market crashed in 2008, the film has

drawn the attention of popular critics and several scholars, who have also paid attention to the first sequel through the lens of the historical and economic context. Stone (2013) views the demon as representing the recession. People ignored the demon's/recession's ominous warnings or approach and were helpless at its arrival. We watch the demon destroy the upper middle-class home of Micah and Katie, representing consumer capitalist dreams in general, perhaps experiencing class resentment-based pleasure, as the fetishized possessions and home are re/possessed. Leyda (2014) also views the films as allegories of debtor capitalism. A generic home is under attack because of a debt/mortgage owed to an unseen, all-pervasive and all-powerful demon, who directly represents debt under neoliberal capitalism. Hahner, Varda and Wilson (2013), applying the Kristevan notion of abjection to the films, view consumer consumption as abject. Despite the torment, the desire for consumption cannot be denied or sublimated and both the characters in the film and the narrative found-footage style communicate the "troubled boundaries between subject and object" (Hahner, et al 374).

While these readings provide insights into cultural fears at the time of the films' making, they do not dive deeply enough into the gender dynamics presented on-screen and the correlation between the male gaze in cinema, surveillance and institutional medicine. None of the critical readings address the focus on maternity that is present from *Paranormal Activity 2* through the final franchise entry, *The Ghost Dimension*. Additionally, the readings elide the significance of the found-footage narrative style and its Foucauldian implications. In addition to economic downturn, the resurgence of anti-choice activities and increased monitoring and regulation of pregnancies was another major socio-cultural shift that occurred contemporaneous to the films' releases. The franchise themes of preparing for maternity and hyper-surveillance of women's activities connect the films to preconception ideology, one aspect of a broader shift towards anti-

choice legislation and public health policy. The films mirror, in nightmarish form, the excessive surveillance and maternalist ideology underlying the preconception health campaign and are thus useful to feminist resistance to anti-choice rhetoric as a fable of the horrors of preconception.

The meta-narrative of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise centers on three generations of women in one family and the multi-generational focus of the films addresses both preconception ideology's notion of the "prepared" mother and the pressure to be applied to women by others to inhabit that role. The eldest woman, grandmother to the main characters of the first three films, is part of a coven dedicated to birthing a male demon, referred to as "Toby," into the world. Not only does the narrative style highlight the surveillance of women as fit or unfit future mothers, but the coven is also revealed to be watching the women for decades in anticipation of the desired birth. Like Rosemary's anti-choice cautionary tale, the *Paranormal Activity* films present a feminist fable of the potential horrors of extreme reproductive surveillance under preconception ideology. While unclear in the first film, maternalist ideology becomes increasingly visible and wide-reaching over the course of the series. Each additional entry clarifies the insidious mechanisms of control at work and introduces and destroys more participants. My feminist reading of these films shows how preconception ideology strips women of both agency and value.

Unlike Hahner, et al. and many other horror film scholars writing after the publication of Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), I do not employ a Kristevan notion of abjection in reading gender in the films as, following Imogen Tyler, I find doing so problematic for deconstructing the cultural abjectification of women and idealistically reinstating female agency. Kristeva utilizes Lacanian theory to suggest the formation of the subject as marked by separation from the maternal. To do so, the maternal is abjectified and rejected in favor of the

Law of the Father and language. Horror is experienced when a subject comes into contact with parts of the self which have been cast off, like the mother, including severed limbs, feces, blood, etc. Kristeva argues that the rejection of the maternal is a traumatic but necessary experience in the establishment of subjectivity and this trauma results in horror of mothers, wombs and markers of sexual difference, especially those that recall the fecund female body.

Tyler is one of several critics of Creed's work and, concerned with the political potential of critical work and the lives of real women, she illuminates several major issues with Creed's Kristevan methodology. She demonstrates that "employing a Kristevan abject paradigm risks reproducing, rather than challenging, histories of violent disgust towards maternal bodies" (77). Kristeva's theory of subjectification universalizes the mother as both necessarily abject and never a subject: "this 'mother' cannot exist as a subject in her own right but only as the subject's perpetual other, that 'liminal reality of human embodiment'" (Tyler 85). Calling for a consideration of the impact of abjection theory on the lives of women in the real world, Tyler notes that pregnant women's leading cause of death is murder committed by their partners and that dehumanization is part of the cycle of abuse that leads to battering and killing women. The theory of the abject mother elides the damage done to real bodies and works against any major change to the systems of oppression that code women, especially mothers, as inherently abject. Repeating the myth of the monstrous-feminine reproduces rather than problematizes violent systems of control enacted against women. "The maternal abject (and the matricide it assumes) is not a pre-historic, unchangeable fact but is a disciplinary norm which has been established through processes of reiteration and has taken on the appearance of a universal truth" (Tyler 95). Instead, more productive feminist work would consider *social* abjection and how women are excluded and marginalized in both ideological representations and practice. This chapter follows

Tyler's suggestion by considering how prepregnant women are disciplined through surveillance and possession in the *Paranormal Activity* films in an effort to control the dangers they pose to the phantom fetus, reflecting the similar methods of disciplining called for in preconception ideology.

This reading of the film franchise demonstrates how the series exposes, and thus challenges, the horrors of preconception by making visible and outlining the gendered connections that exist between surveillance, reproduction, and agency. While horror films are often accused of perpetuating or creating misogyny, it is possible for them to reveal misogyny in the dominant ideology by demonstrating the damaging effects of anti-woman structures on the bodies and well-being of female characters. The *Paranormal Activity* films resist preconception's call for pro-natalist, maternalist surveillance through the horrific consequences they present. The self-reflexive act of viewing performed by the audience as they watch a narrative presented in found-footage style reinforces the theme of surveillance, and its possible ill effects. Understanding the films in this context makes visible the often less obvious horrors of discipline and surveillance women undergo in the medical establishment. Horror films, as cultural nightmares, have the potential to reveal as horrific these experiences.

Due to the violence done to women in the genre, much, though by no means all, of the critical literature on horror film reads the genre as a conservative cultural force. While there are indeed many horror films that evade any but a conservative reading, the horror genre itself can be used to interrogate and critique conservative social politics, as films like *Teeth* (2007), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *The Last Exorcism, Part II* (2013), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Get Out* (2017), and *Us* (2019) suggest. Horror provides an appropriate stage for highlighting injustices as its aim is to

make us afraid. What is scarier than realizing the real world around you is deeply unjust and dangerous?

The *Paranormal Activity* film series presents a nightmarish world of diabolical pro-natalism and hyper-surveillance and in this way engages with the discursive struggle over female worth and power. The main female characters in the series are either destroyed by or (at times knowingly and at others unwittingly) complicit with a patriarchal, demonic pregnancy plot. This plot becomes both more clear and more wide-reaching as the series progresses. For example, the main character and young mother in *Paranormal Activity 2*, Kristi, after producing the male heir she was groomed to birth, is killed during his infancy and Kristi's grandmother, Lois, ends or manipulates the lives of her own daughter and granddaughters in the third film. The franchise's meta-narrative constructs a setting where motherhood is defined by giving birth but is independent of child-rearing, where a woman's reason for being is to become pregnant with male offspring,[10] where women conspire against each other to bring about male heirs, and where every detail of this process is meticulously, non-consensually observed by masculine subjects who hold power over the female objects of their gaze. This franchise presents a cautionary tale against the ideology of preconception care, increased medical surveillance and the subsequent bodily and behavioral discipline they entail by showing how these technologies may be abused to control women. The audience participates in this scenario, because of the found-footage format, by self-consciously viewing the horror of being tormented by surveillance.

The six *Paranormal Activity* horror films are all told via found-footage narrative structures; each is seemingly a glimpse of real life as captured by various video-recording devices set-up and controlled by the films' characters as they create and are inhabitants of their own domestic Panopticons. Strange events begin to happen inside the home and characters set up

video recorders to try to understand what is going on. Events become more intense and dangerous until the characters are destroyed, either physically or psychically. While the found-footage-format may have been useful as a low-budget method to create a genuinely creepy atmosphere, it persisted throughout the series, even as budgets grew. Found-footage proved to be an effective generator of both scares and revenues and viewers responded well to it emotionally and financially. Characters in the series continue to rely on it as way to dominate the strange happenings in their homes, as well as the women who live in them. The persistent use of surveillance as a method of control in the films adapts the advocated constant surveillance of women's bodies in preconception ideology to the screen in fictionalized format. Further, just as the act of viewing the demon increases its power, the invasive visibility of preconception facilitates a challenge to biological discourses of the female and fetal bodies.

The Phantom Fetus and Other Scientific Fictions in Pre-pregnancy Discourse

The concept of preconception represents an attempt to rewrite the cultural definitions of womanhood and the beginning of life. Preconception positions women as either pregnant or pre-pregnant, but never as not pregnant, and they are enjoined to maintain their health in anticipation of providing the best possible pregnancy for a "future" fetus ("A 2005 Message"). As the notion of a "future" fetus reinforces the conflation of womanhood with motherhood, in which women are essentialized as mothers whether they want to be them or not, I instead follow Waggoner in using the term "phantom" fetus. To label it instead a "future" fetus puts a being which may never exist into the category of "subject," as someone who will certainly exist and who is named accordingly. Subjectivity removes the fetus from the pregnant woman and grants it a biologically impossible independent personhood, a very dangerous rhetorical direction for women's

reproductive rights. While a fetus belongs in the natural world, a "future fetus" inhabits the genre of utopian fiction. The look to the future, already an aspect of birth and child discourse, imbues a utopian energy to the term which is certainly inappropriate for feminist use in reference to a world of decreased agency for women; a dystopia for female reproductive rights. The "phantom fetus," however, belongs to the horror genre.

Applying the label "phantom" reinforces the non-existent status of the hypothetical being, made at the expense of the very real woman, and reinforces the immaterial and non-biological status of the being. It exists, if it exists at all, in the realm of the un- or super-natural. This spectral being invokes fear in those concerned with summoning its ghostly form into flesh as it has the potential to manifest into something monstrous. A potentially pregnant woman, like a haunted house, is monitored and observed to ensure that the phantom will be given a physical, healthy form. The "phantom fetus" thus possesses a woman's body: in both the supernatural sense (an immaterial being invading and dwelling within) and in the sense of ownership. Preconception ideology would have all women of child-bearing age so haunted and thus obsessed with preparing the way for the transmogrification of phantoms into fetuses

The very concept of the "phantom," like that of the "zero" trimester, goes against enlightenment thinking and scientific reason, as does the public health campaign itself. Waggoner, in a study of the CDC's preconception recommendations to all women of childbearing potential, insightfully asks, "Why did a group of experts promote prepregnancy care in spite of a poverty of evidence? Given the biological fact that gestation lasts nine months, how did we start to think that it should (for individual behavior and policy purposes) figuratively last longer than that?" ("Cultivating" 346). Noting that the expert group intentionally conflated maternal health with women's health in order to gain political and financial support for the

initiative, Waggoner cites the long-established importance of maternalism in U.S. policy theory and cultural logic ("Cultivating" 357). Maternalism is here defined as conflating the cultural understanding of "woman" with "mother" and of women's needs with maternal needs. Preconception seeks to expand maternalism by creating a new, non-scientific binary for women, pregnant or pre-pregnant, and to outline disciplinary methods for controlling bodies in both categories.

Women and girls in the *Paranormal Activity* films, as fictional characters, are able to inhabit the impossible position of pre-pregnancy. They demonstrate the surveillance and disciplining that are part of that positionality, as well as the loss of agency maternalism demands. The characters do not live for themselves but for the beings they are expected to carry into the world and thus are coerced into expending their energies and lives on preconception preparations and anticipated pregnancies.

The concept of preconception also represents a discursive struggle over the boundaries of pregnancy. Pushed by public health officials starting in 2005, with a second major push in 2013, it centers on the potential risks to a fetus early in pregnancy, before a woman knows she is pregnant, and attempts to incorporate a woman of childbearing potential who is not pregnant culturally into the category of pregnancy. This incorporation necessitates and justifies increased control and surveillance of women's bodies in the name of the health of their phantom fetuses. However, there is a paucity of evidence that, with the exception of folic acid intake, women's health activities before pregnancy greatly impact their pregnancy outcomes. Additionally, this policy ignores sperm health and does not include recommendations or surveillance for men, despite the known effects of diet, obesity, age, and stress on sperm quality. Similarly, male

bodies, especially white male bodies, are far less controlled in the film series and there is little grooming for paternity.

In preconception ideology, the phantom fetus is exposed to danger and disorder if a woman is not behaving as if pre-pregnant. Improper pre-pregnant behavior is in need of discipline. As Foucault notes, "Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions,' of the plague, of rebellion, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder" (*Discipline* 198). The CDC's proscriptions for appropriate pre-pregnant behavior discipline errant mothers, whose improper behavior is seen as putting the well-being of their fetus at risk by spreading a "contagious" state of less than ideal health. Like the women of *Paranormal Activity*, a woman's well-being is valued for the health of the phantom fetus, always the ultimate goal of her body, even before present. Observers, in the name of the phantom fetus, are empowered to discipline, and disciplining healthcare providers are enjoined to observe, before as well as during pregnancy. The women in the film are intensely scrutinized and their actions controlled towards the singular end of gestating and birthing the phantom fetus.

The maternalistic disciplining women are subject to is rooted in the power of the reproductive body. Foucault names the less violent and more omnipresent form of power which arose in post-monarchical France as "biopower." Biopower manifests in two forms: disciplinary power, in which the body is viewed as a machine and its activities and identities are shaped through diffuse forms of control, and regulatory power, concerned with the population and addressed by state powers (*History* 139). Women's bodies, as both individual reproductive "machines" and as reproducers of the species as a whole, exist as a convergence point between these two inter-related forms of power. The great potential power of women's bodies, both

singularly and collectively, is exploited under patriarchal capitalism and is thus subject to many forms of control, both disciplinary and regulatory. “The primary duty of female citizens towards the nation is to engage in its biological reproduction” (Mottier 149). Indeed, disciplinary controls, by creating subject identities for women in which they see themselves as necessarily mothers, normalize expectations for the disciplining and surveillance of pregnant bodies which in turn provides a rationale for increased regulatory control over pregnancies. Examples of such regulation include legal fetal personhood and charging women who have miscarriages with murder. As in the film series, women are disciplined in the name of defense of the fetus.

Pregnancies are subject to intense medical and social surveillance and this surveillance is exposed and amplified in the *Paranormal Activity* series. The multiple cameras of the films (cell phone, camcorder, laptops, Go-Pro, Xbox Kinnect, home security cameras, etc.) reflect new technologies and are used in the film to capture women’s domestic activities and make these formerly private moments open to observation and evaluation. Increased technology, like the ultrasound and sonogram, have rendered pregnancy visible to the medical eye, rather than just to the experience of the pregnant woman (Firth). This monitoring is not power-free but gives healthcare providers, and politicians, authority over the pregnancy and the pregnant woman’s behavior through what Deborah Lupton terms the “fetishisation of the fetus” (337). Preconception healthcare surveillance extends this power, disciplining the lives of women between menarche and menopause, and reaches into their bodies, in search of the phantom fetus. Foucault notes of disciplinary societies, the “disciplinary modality of power has...[made] it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements. It assures an infinitesimal distribution of the power relations" (*Discipline* 216). Under preconception, this disciplining power extends even to a phantom fetus, hidden supernaturally deep within a

woman's body, while the cameras of the found-footage narrative style similarly peer closely for evidence of the immaterial demon, its relationship to women's bodies and women's private, domestic activities. Like the indistinct images of an ultrasound, the viewer is required to fill in and interpret what they see, obscured by a lack of clarity and fuzziness on the screen. Unlike regular film, both ultrasound and fount-footage images invite viewers to participate in meaning-making.

Foucault also notes that disciplinary power functions in a double mode of binary branding and/or coercive assignment (*Discipline* 199); the CDC guidelines coercively divide women into the pre/pregnant binary and effectively erase the possibility of being not pregnant and the *Paranormal Activity* meta-narrative positions female characters as either mothers or mothers-in-training. Even six-year-old girls Kristi and Leila from the third and final films respectively are being prepared for parturition by the invisible demon, as well as coven members. Whether pregnant or prepregnant, a woman's health and health behaviors are disciplined for the benefit of the phantom fetus while the filmic girls and women are pushed, manipulated or possessed for the sake of a demon. As always-already pregnant, women are subject to self, public, or institutional healthcare surveillance and control. This new binary relies on an ideology of maternalism and the practice of surveillance for policing the borders of these categories. The films reflect this view by focusing the gaze on the domestic detail of the girls' and women's lives, watching intently for their interactions with the phantom.

Neither maternalism nor social policy based on maternalism are new concepts in the United States (Waggoner, "Cultivating" 356). However, the specific policy of advocating preconception care and considering all women of reproductive age as prepregnant represents a major ideological shift in the concepts of womanhood, the social value of women, a belief in

when life begins, and maternal responsibility for pregnancy outcomes. Both policy and film align in conflating a woman's worth with her maternal status. They echo each other, capturing a cultural moment of anti-feminist discourse attempting to situate "all women of childbearing age as ontologically prepregnant" and "women primarily as reproductive vessels…all women of reproductive age first and foremost as prepregnant bodies" (Waggoner, "Motherhood" 956). If healthcare providers repeatedly approach their female patients with a preconception agenda, women experience themselves as anticipatory mothers in the eyes of institutional medicine.

The representation of women in policy and in popular culture contributes to both their identity and to the cultural meaning of woman: "...the media play a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things that they reflect. It is not that there is a world outside, 'out there', which exists free of the discourses of representation. What is 'out there' is, in part, constituted by how it is represented" (Hall 14). The *Paranormal Activity* films represent women under surveillance, especially in their role as mothers, and they unintentionally expose the horror of preconception ideology. Surveillance dominates the characters' lives and restricts their purpose to the singular goal of bringing the phantom fetus into the world. Reading the series this way helps make sense of why this ideology is dangerous for women's bodily autonomy and provides a feminist fable, available for use in anti-misogynistic discourse.

Phantom Motherhood on Film

Camera-obsessed Micah films his girlfriend Katie, with and without her consent, and as he does so, strange things begin happening. He covers most of the house with cameras, despite Katie's wishes, to capture this activity. The strange events are revealed to be caused by a demon

stalking Katie, one who had tormented her as a child. Katie is eventually possessed and kills Micah, before disappearing into the night.

The cameras in this first film serve to establish a power dynamic between the main characters that is decidedly gendered. Micah sets up the cameras in the house after the strange events begin to occur and he is by far the most aggressive and dominating cameraperson in the series in his desire to possess and control the events, his home, and his girlfriend, Katie. Micah is an unsympathetic character, as he emotionally abuses and lies to Katie, in addition to treating her like one of many prized possessions to be filmed for his scopophilic satisfaction. As Mulvey has observed, the cinematic gaze is typically male (9) and the *Paranormal Activity* films in no way challenge this tradition, continuing to enact the male gaze in subsequent films. Katie is presented as an erotic, voyeuristic spectacle for both Micah and the audience and fetishization of her is used to subjugate Katie and the threat she represents. This objectification aligns with Mulvey's argument that men in films make things happen and advance the plot while, as spectacle, things happen to women on screen (6).

While Micah certainly presents the observer as authority figure, attempting to exercise control over powerless others via control over the gaze, his is a failed attempt at exerting authority as he cannot stop the paranormal events and disruption of his home, and he is ultimately killed by Katie. As a direct result of his escalating attempts at control and surveillance, Katie becomes possessed by the demon and destroys Micah. Doing show demonstrates the limit of Micah’s utility to the supernatural plot. His anger and gaze strengthen the demon, allowing it to fully possess Katie. Without his insistence on constant watching, Katie would have ignored the events and possibly stopped them. Though Micah fails Katie, he succeeds in helping the phantom fetus. Micah’s death and Katie’s possession leave Katie free to

collect her nephew and bring him into the Midwives' demonic plot. This ending suggests the primacy of the phantom fetus over adult men, as well as women. Micah, standing in the way of the larger patriarchal project, is eliminated. He serves his purpose by engendering fear and feeding attention to the demon via the camera; this fear and attention empowers the demon to inhabit Katie. Angry and violent, Micah refuses to cease his attempts to control Katie and endangers the positon of the demon within her. For this, he is killed by the demon, using Katie's possessed body to accomplish the murder. Female bodies are dangerous to men; killing and sacrificing them for the purpose of futurity.

Micah's suffering is swiftly ended, fortunate for him, while Katie's subjugation and service to the phantom fetus continues for years. Completely possessed, she loses all bodily agency and the rest of her life, as far as we see it in the series, is spent in service to the coven's plot to birth and gather male children. Katie depicts the ideal female subject under preconception ideology: her body is completely put to service for the benefit of phantom fetuses. She is tormented, physically attacked, exhausted and worn down until we see her left an empty husk. All trace of her own personality and her agency are removed and she becomes a pitiable victim, curled up in her bed and defeated. Any focus on her own self has been removed and she is remade into an empty vessel whose actions never endanger but always serve the phantom being. She can no longer challenge the being inside of her but is subject to its needs, mirroring a woman enjoined by preconception ideology to consider the health needs of a phantom fetus before a consideration of her own. This ending suggests the horror of being a possessable, walking womb.

The second film in the series, *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010), serves to explain why the phantom possesses Katie and in doing so develops a focus on maternalism in the series by showing the centrality of the birthing, though not rearing, of children and expands the focus from

one woman to her entire family. The prequel takes place shortly before the events of the first and focuses on the demon tormenting the family of Katie's sister, Kristi. After a series of spooky events, Kristi is possessed and becomes viciously protective of her infant son, Hunter. Ali, Kristi's stepdaughter, is keenly aware of the strange events and suspects that Kristi's grandmother or great-grandmother made a pact with the devil, promising a male child and Hunter is the first male child on Kristi's side in almost 100 years. Kristi's husband and their Latina housekeeper, who portrays a stereotypical mystic Other, transfer the demon to Katie. This event backfires, however, and Katie, after killing Micah, next kills Kristi and her husband and steals Hunter. Kristi's death suggests the lack of concern for mothers in pro-natalist ideology as, once they give birth, their well-being is no longer of importance. Kristi fulfills her purpose in giving birth to a son and is afterwards disposable. Since Hunter has a purpose (revealed in the final film), it becomes Katie's job to further prepare him. This role falls to Katie as she is the current vessel for the phantom fetus and, as such, is compelled to do anything to further its health, including murder her own sister, lover, and brother-in-law. The needs of the phantom fetus supersede all other familial obligations and relationships and Hunter's preparation as "father" to the demon consumes Katie's life.

This film establishes a disciplinary association between surveillance and mothering, with the found-footage narrative technique making clear the subtext of monitoring mothers and future mothers for the benefit of the phantom fetus. The camera focuses on Kristi in her role as caregiver to infant Hunter, allowing outside observation and judgment of her activities. Whether she acts as a fit or unfit mother, her performance is available to external judgment, even when she is acting in the presumed privacy of her home. Like a prepregnant woman questioned by her doctor about her emotional state, exercise habits, weight, diet, etc. for the benefit of assessing

fitness for the phantom fetus, Kristi's well-being is observed and assessed. This examination is not performed out of concern for her own sake but for her ability to properly mother an infant. Surveillance in both this story and in preconception ideology is used to monitor and correct the fitness of a real or anticipatory mother.

Another preconception ideology aspect of the film is the infantilization of women, as demonstrated by the devaluation of Kristi's emotions and knowledge by her husband, Daniel. Daniel installs the cameras after an apparent break-in, really caused by the demon, but does not believe the events filmed are supernatural, as Kristi insists. Obedient to Daniel's wishes, Kristi remains in the home and pretends everything is normal. This deference results in a physical assault against her and her full possession by the demon. The danger depicted in this film recalls of the myth of hysteria, where a woman's genuine concerns are dismissed, resulting in danger to herself, and facilitates an understanding of preconception ideology as rooted in the same misogynist beliefs as hysteria. Both reduce women to the cultural notion of woman as not rational beings but as bodies controlled by a potentially unruly womb, which can cause both irrational behavior, monstrous births, and murder.

Paranormal Activity 3 (2011) focuses on providing further background information for the events in *1* and *2* by taking the viewer to the earliest point in which the phantom fetus possesses Kristi and in doing so, establishes pre-pregnancy of a condition existent in childhood for girls. Set in the mid-1980s, it focuses on a brief period in Kristi and Katie's childhood when the demon was tormenting them. The demon, named Toby, plays with Kristi and demands her allegiance while Katie is attacked and tormented by Toby. The girls live with their mother, Julie, and her conveniently camera-obsessed boyfriend, Dennis, until the events escalate to the point where the doubting mother is almost harmed. The family then flees to the home of Julie's

mother, Lois. In the middle of the night, Kristi and Katie disappear and older women arrive at the house, menacing Julie and Dennis with their presence. Julie and Dennis are killed, presumably by Toby, and the film ends with Lois taking the girls upstairs to “get ready.” Viewers are directed to feel pity and concern for the girls; the adults who cared about their safety and normal development have been eliminated and they are left in the hands of a woman partially responsible for killing her own daughter. Earlier in the film, Lois had played dress-up with the girls and Kristi was dressed as a bride to be married to Toby. Kristi is made a child-bride by her grandmother, showing the complicity of some women under hetero-patriarchy in endangering their fellow females. These actions and the 1980s setting of the film mirror conservative anti-choice rhetoric that was becoming increasingly prominent at the time.

Lois' injunction at the conclusion of the third film to "get ready" explicitly means to get ready for pregnancy; mother-figures who assist this readying endangering Kristi's autonomy while those who would oppose the readying are eliminated. Both Lois and their mother fail the girls as protectors and caretakers, with the former sacrificing their agency for the benefit of the cult while Julie is unable to prevent this from happening. Kristi and Katie's mother is neglectful in not recognizing and responding to the danger her daughters are in, primarily through her refusal to look. She rejects the opportunity to assume the gaze, leaving it to her boyfriend. As a result, both of them are killed. Their deaths redirect the girls' care to their maternal grandmother. Lois is portrayed negatively earlier in the film, nagging her daughter to have more children and find a richer partner. Complicit in her daughter's death, she is without doubt also depicted as a bad mother. Further, she is a bad surrogate mother to the girls, dedicating them to cult training and brainwashing.

Lois' role as an instrument in the advancement of the demonic plot aligns with the complicity in surveilling and disciplining pregnant women that is demanded of other women in pro-natalist, preconception policy. In addition to facilitating the childhood marriage of Kristi and Toby, Lois exhorts her daughter to have more children and, especially, a son. Lois is complicit in her daughter's death, having no more use for Julie after she declares that she doesn't want any more children. Lois then shifts her attention to Kristi who, though only six, is the next potential mother to a son. Indeed, any mother in the films who is not a part of the coven is killed by it or Toby. These murders reinforce the previously mentioned disregard for mothers in preconception ideology. For the most part, mothers in the series do not live far beyond parturition. Lois is an exception, as a servant of the phantom fetus, and she is figured as being a bad mother to the females in her line who are already born and are well past infancy.

Conversely, though not likely to produce more fetuses, Lois is portrayed as a good mother to the demon, Toby, which keeps her from being killed in the film as she will sacrifice anything in service to him. She secures Toby's future bride and sacrifices her family to his long-sought physical birth. As Lois and the other Midwives plot, murder for, and center their lives around the goal of bringing the demon to physical form, they are essentially ideal anticipatory mothers, looking forward to the rewards of complicity for their service. Their lives are dedicated to the preparations needed for the phantom fetus/demon to experience the healthiest possible pregnancy and parturition. This is a nightmare of families corrupted and female solidarity misused.

The fourth film (2012) moves back to the mid-2000s and focuses on the family who have unknowingly adopted Hunter and expands the fable of preconception horrors by showing the extent of the wider network of surveillance and control. The creepy boy who lives across the

street with his supposed mother, Katie, prepares Hunter for the coven and for Toby. The adopting family is all killed, and the film ends with a view of the coven, comprising dozens of adult women of a variety of ages, rushing towards the camera. The destruction of the camera is intended to allow them a return to invisibility. The revelation of the coven's size and diversity threatens to reveal the extent of the network of surveillance and control; revelation has the potential to lead to resistance. Making visible the previously invisible conspirators calls them out and allows them to be challenged, necessitating their destruction of the camera when it is turned away from prepregnant women and instead focuses on them. When they can be seen, they also fail to act as panoptic jailers; their presence makes clear their moments of absence and relaxes the discipline of the observed women.

A brief view of the coven has a significant meaning for the series: any and all women may be complicit in the project of preconception surveillance and control. The size of the gathered coven is intended to surprise the viewer by suggesting the number of women involved in the plot, however, the series also suggests that even women, but never men, outside of the coven are ultimately acting in service to its goals. Unwitting women and girls have their familial love co-opted and redirected by the coven. This manipulation results in the women and girls acting as additional midwives for the phantom fetus. The film opens with video of pre-possession Katie giving a present to infant Hunter, naming herself as his "best aunt," before abruptly switching to footage from the second film of a possessed Katie murdering Kristi and disappearing into the night with Hunter. The film then switches to Alex recording six-year-old Hunter's soccer game and announcing herself to be his "best sister." Neither Katie nor Alex are mothers, but they are sororal care-takers, filling in when mothers are deceased (Hunter's birth mother) or distracted (Hunter's adoptive mother). It is never brothers or uncles who fill this role

and the fathers in the series rarely provide more than disbelief or frustration as a response to female concerns and paranormal activities. This bias re-emphasizes the biological essentialism underlying preconception. Gender is destiny in this worldview, and establishes a predeterminism that reinforces maternal destiny.

The main recurring characters to this point in the series, Kristi, Katie, and Lois, are all women essentialized as caretakers and their value is solely related to the care of the phantom fetus, the injunction of a pre-pregnancy materialist view. Kristi's short life is the most striking example of this project. From the time she is six, she is being prepared to be a mother to an important son. Her grandmother dresses her as a bride and she is ritually married to Toby at this young age. As she grows up, she is repeatedly reminded of her value as a future mother. The brief tenure of the motherhood, as shown in the second film, suggests that by mother, the coven means the person who births a child, but doesn't necessarily raise it. Kristi is killed while Hunter is still too young to walk; her usefulness is short-lived. This devaluation of women post-birth echoes anti-choice rhetoric, especially preconception, where great value is placed on a fetus but much less on a child, with less still given to a mother as anything other than a womb. The theme of the only temporary importance of mothers is continued in the next film in the series.

The next film, *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (2014) reveals how preconception ideology is specifically concerned with white futurity. The film shows the cost to both mothers and sons involved in the Midwives' plot, raising the issues of the damage done to men, especially non-white men, under white supremacist patriarchy. This movie focuses on Jesse, a young man who discovers that he is the firstborn son of a Midwives coven witch who died in childbirth, and thus he is one of the males offered up to serve the demon. Jesse and his friend Oscar, both recent high school graduates, are revealed to have been marked by the coven while

in utero and, having come of age, they are being possessed and taken over by demons. Both suffer during the process, losing their families as well as their pre-possession identities. Both are first-born sons whose mothers died during childbirth. As Kristi did not die until at least a year after Hunter's birth, maternal death at parturition doesn't seem to be necessary in the mythology but does suggest that the two Latina mothers are even more disposable and/or vulnerable than their white counterpart. Kristi does live through Hunter's first year of life and they reside in an upper-middle to upper-class home. Conversely, Oscar and Jesse's mothers die at their birth and are not even given names, and the boys grow up in a dangerous, lower economic class area. This reflects the way preconception ideology elides racial and class differences in birth outcomes and falsely presumes that women can control the health of fetuses, regardless of institutional racism and classism. The film ends with Jesse possessed and in the company of a large coven of women, and all of his friends and family members have been killed, as they are no longer useful after he reaches maturity. Jesse is kept alive as his laboring, adult body is necessary for the advancement of the demonic plot. However, this close ties to friends and family are a threat so he is separated from them and dislocated from his home. In doing so, he becomes similar to a migrant worker, endangered by social isolation and brought into a system designed to exploit him and keep him marginalized and thus under control.

It is explained during the film that Lois and the other Midwives are gathering first-born sons to create "some kind of army:" incorporating them into a servant-collective rather than individual positions of importance and showing the nominal value of men in preconception ideology. This revelation suggests that the men brought into the group, in addition to the women who birth them, will lose themselves, even if they do survive the loss of their mothers. This loss of self again mirrors the pro-natalist aspect of anti-choice rhetoric, including preconception

policy, which focuses on the well-being of fetuses until birth but is silent on both the welfare of the infant for the rest of its life and on the welfare of the mother. It also mirrors the alienation of the proletariat worker under capitalist ideology.

The ultimate project of preconception is the disciplining of female bodies to produce optimal offspring. Women are the space in which the phantom fetus is transformed into flesh. With the conclusion of the film series, the ultimate project of the coven is similarly revealed to be the transformation of the invisible demon Toby into corporeal form. The phantom fetus in the film series is a specifically demonic one, directly or indirectly possessing generations of women over the course of the story's arc. This revelation and birth occur in the sixth and final film, *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (2015). Having both the highest budget and the lowest grossing numbers, *The Ghost Dimension* presents a shift in both visual effects and plot, as the creators try to simultaneously add new elements to a worn series and bring it to a logical conclusion. While promoted as completing the series and providing answers, it does not do so thoroughly and, overall, the mythos is left with numerous discontinuities and plot holes. In this film, a new family moves into a house which has been built on the site of Katie and Kristi's childhood home. The young daughter, Leila, interacts with Toby as an invisible friend. An old box of tapes and a special video camera are discovered. The camera is uniquely designed and able to record supernatural activity, finally giving viewers a look at what had been causing the strange noises and events in the previous five films. The tapes are from the period of the girls' childhood, showing clips from the third movie as well as new footage of the girls being raised by Lois and the cult and trained by a man called "Uncle Kent." This training includes working with Toby to see into the future, looping the watching of the tapes to their filming as Kristi reacts on camera to her future viewers. After a botched cleansing, a priest and the adults are killed and

Leila opens a portal back to the 1980s home. A few drops of her blood are used to complete the coven's long project and the previously phantasmal Toby is given a physical form. The multi-year period of preconception surveillance depicted in the earlier films results in a successful parturition as the phantom fetus is made flesh, leaving a long trail of bodies and destroyed lives behind as the cost of his birth. Even a demon fetus is entitled to the subordination of female bodies.

Ghost Dimension, by focusing on the preparation of two pre-pubescent girls for reproduction, highlights the grotesqueries of the obsessive focus on prepregnant females as future mothers, demonstrating the extent and horror of pre-pregnant maternalism. Kristi's training to look into the future is a call to consider her future pregnancy and, especially, the needs of the phantom fetus that already inhabits her young body. She is being trained to look forward to a future fetus. The cult leader reinforces that Kristi's importance is based on the son she will have, and, because of this, she undergoes hours of filmed, uncomfortable training. Her son, Hunter, is connected to Leila. Both were born on the same day and by bringing them together to intermix their blood, a symbolic sexual coupling, the demon Toby is born into a physical body. Though her role as a mother is symbolic, Leila (like Kristi, she is only six years old) is focused on reproduction. Playing with the nativity figures her mother is unpacking, Leila holds Mary and says that "She is going to have a special baby." Like Mary, Kristi and Leila are young females whose bodies are used without consent in order to bring a supernatural son into the world.

The birthing of the phantom fetus, Toby, into flesh is revealed to have been the goal of the Midwives coven all along; this reinforces the complicity of non-mothers with the preconception project and recalls the historical co-opting of the figure of the witch/midwife as a

knowledgeable woman who helps other women. Early in the film series, the name of the coven was known but its meaning was as mysterious as their greater purpose. The Midwives were presumably bringing some new life into the world but it was unclear that their intention was to facilitate a monstrous birth, such as Toby the demon. Conflating midwifery with witchcraft and accusations of causing monstrous births has historical precedent in the removal of female power over reproduction. The power of Early Modern midwives threatened the emerging male medical profession and as such, their experience and knowledge were derided and ultimately their authority was stripped away by male practitioners of biomedicine (Ehrenrich and English). The recollection of this aspect of obstetric history is useful in better understanding the film series as a feminist fable against preconception. The viewer is reminded of the patriarchal removal of knowledgeable women's authority, the dissolution of female solidarity under patriarchy, and the male appropriation of authority over pregnancy and birth in institutionalized healthcare.

The film series conflates authority with men, just as birthing and women are essentially conjoined. Toby and Uncle Kent, both authority figures within the coven, are also the only males we see working in complicity with the group and are the only identified coven leaders. While the coven seems at first to be comprised only of older women, consistent with many popular representations of witches, the group later grows in size and diversity. This variety suggests the potential complicity of any woman with the coven and their diabolical project of birthing sons for Satan. Furthermore, despite the otherwise complete composition of the cult as of only women, as far as is shown, they are working in service of a demon coded as male and Kristi and Katie are instructed by a man, represented as the ultimate knowledge-keeper of the group.

As the final film and the installment advertised to provide answers explaining everything that has come before, *Ghost Dimension* makes explicit that the act of surveillance itself is

advancing the demonic plot just as surveillance is a required component of preconception ideology. The priest in the sixth film tells the worried parents, “Demons feed on fear. The more attention you give, the stronger it grows.” As both a conduit of fear-produced power and a way of generating increased fear, the camera itself feeds, as well as observes, the demon. Toby becomes more powerful and closer to achieving his physical form with the more fear and attention directed at him. Though the characters set-up cameras in an attempt to gain mastery over the strange things happening in their homes, they are not granted authority or control by doing so. Rather, they are complicit in their own destruction, thereby creating a healthier ‘pregnancy’ for Toby.

Surveillance directly contributes to the growth and strength of the demonic fetus, mirroring the intentions of preconception health surveillance. Fear of failing to have a healthy fetus, misconstrued as something that can be thoroughly controlled by a woman before and during her pregnancy, creates a desire for increased surveillance by healthcare providers and motivates self-surveillance. To not watch one’s self becomes negligence; a negligence which is doubly damning for pregnant women in a culture that fetishizes fetuses.

Homes, closely linked with femininity, are used in the series not only as claustrophobic sets but as mirrors of women: inhabitable, haunted, and disposable and spending so much time inside and examining them in the films reinforces preconception notions of women as wombs. Built on the site where Kristi and Katie first met Toby, the home in the final film is revealed to have been designed as a portal for Toby's manifestation, making it, like other domestic spaces in the series, an inhabitable womb, awaiting phantom occupancy. Repeatedly, the domestic space itself is gendered female, depicted as either producing or preparing to produce a new being, and it is shown to be a site of potential risk. All of the films take place almost exclusively within the

walls of the home and it is in this space that dangers and demons dwell. Portals are repeatedly present and important in the films, reinforcing the theme of birthing. Throughout all the films, Toby is busy opening and closing doors, seeking access to and control over the females in the films. Children in the third and fourth films contact Toby in closets and facilitate his access to others via these dark, interior spaces. The house in the last film is constructed as a giant portal for Toby, and Katie leads the unlucky family to it. In it, Leila creates, opens, and passes through a birth-canal like tunnel to access the 1980s story and home via her own bedroom. The focus on these various entry points positions all domestic spaces in the films as both potential wombs and potential spaces to be born into. Like the female body in preconception ideology, these spaces exist to be prepared for future inhabitants, beings more important than the spaces, which are routinely destroyed after their purpose is served.

Invading these domestic spaces are the male controlled and ever-present cameras which constantly observe and record activities within, both supernatural and mundane, reinforcing patriarchal control over female bodies. While the spaces are decidedly feminized, technology is masculinized, and cameras are clearly phallic. Men in the series who are not directly connected to the coven are busy with their own paternalistic project: filming "their" women. As in preconception health policy, men are not taught how to be fit future fathers but are instead enlisted in the project of monitoring the women who carry children. While the found-footage film genre is based on constant surveillance, the camera does not necessarily need to be controlled by male characters. However, in the *Paranormal Activity* series, control over and access to footage always belongs to men, while women are their primary video subjects. This reflects the predominantly male institution of biomedical healthcare. Men are observers and women are to be observed in both film and in public health.

The constant surveillance of women in the *Paranormal Activity* films, outlined above, places these fictional females in a reproductive panopticon which mirrors the one preconception policy seeks to establish. Recommendation two of the Surgeon General's message states that the agenda aims to "assure that all women of childbearing age in the United States receive preconception care services (i.e., evidence-based risk screening, health promotion, and interventions) that will enable them to enter pregnancy in optimal health" (Johnson, et al.). This emphasis on controlling women's bodies recalls Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's prison design, the Panopticon, and its crucial effect:

> to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action...in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (*Discipline* 201)

Even when out of the public and healthcare institutional eye, women are instructed to remain vigilant in disciplining their bodies to the care of phantom fetuses. Sandra Lee Bartky notes in her study of the social construction of femininity, "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment" (34). This statement applies equally well to the project of pre-conception care, encouraging all women of child-bearing age to perform appropriately under the gaze of an internalized doctor.

Obsessive home surveillance, as the narrative style used in the *Paranormal Activity* films, creates a panopticon to which both the characters and the audience are privy and it is one which is focused on gathering knowledge about women's bodies. Each film necessitates excuses for why the characters are filming their lives at home. In every film, a few strange things begin to

happen and are coincidently caught during the taping of a special event (new camera purchase, family party, holidays, etc.). Characters then express a desire to know what is happening and to catch it on camera, as if surveillance will lead to control over the mysterious forces they are experiencing. The diegetic expectation is that watching results in knowledge and control, i.e. the power to discipline an observed other. In all of the films but *4*, a man is the instigator of the recording, usually over the protests of his significant other. Furthermore, in *4*, even Alex (a teenage girl) must have her boyfriend set up cameras around the house and she is never able to access the footage on her own because of her inability to use the technology. In the *Paranormal Activity* world, only men have the power of surveillance. As they are not concerned with filming themselves or are often physically behind the camera, the vast majority of the footage is of the women in the house. In the panoptic scenario of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, woman is the inmate and man the jailer. This mirrors the controlling male gaze of cinema, as well as the predominantly male medical gaze afforded by increasingly invasive medical technologies used during pregnancy (Sawicki 193).

Conclusion

As the film series progresses, the insertion of the phantom fetus in the female body occurs at younger and younger ages, further and further away from the moment of parturition; echoing the increased invasiveness of the surveillance of the womb. As advances in medical technology allow for a more nuanced and realistic view of the fetus before birth, granting it increased subjectivity and agency, policies related to preconception officially bestow subjectivity and power on the phantom fetus. The *Paranormal Activity* films, which show the paranormal happenings in greater clarity and detail as the series progresses, revolve around the insertion,

strengthening, and birth of the phantom Toby. Toby is given primacy of importance. Women useful to his healthy development are possessed and their agency stolen. Women who reject his project are destroyed. Younger and younger women are recruited into this project, cutting off their potential and power as individuals at an increasingly early age. First mothers, then pregnant women, and finally prepregnant women are subject to pro-natalist, maternalist discipline.

In the real world, women's psychological well-being may be negatively impacted by the implication that women's value comes from being baby vessels (rather than autonomous adults), the experience of constant surveillance, the discussion of pregnancy at every point of engagement with institutional healthcare, and possible internal or external accusations of failure if they do not ever reproduce. In fiction, the females of these films suffer psychological abuse via surveillance, harassment by family over their anti-mothering or "irrational" behavior and are disposed of when their value to the phantom fetus has expired.

From the first fictional film exorcism when Jesus cast demons out of Mary Magdalene, possessed on-screen women are stand-ins for the debate over the control of women's bodies. Part of this control is enacted through ideas of women's bodies as reproducers, including cultural notions of when life begins and how much control women have over the health of their fetuses. The *Paranormal Activity* films present an ideology in line with the underlying assumptions of preconception healthcare and reveal the horrors of women devoid of agency, but eternally pregnant with the phantom fetuses that possess them.

This focus on the control of the eternally prepregnant woman raises another question: what is the value of a woman who, ideally, will never become pregnant as a function of her dedication to another patriarchal institution, namely the Catholic Church? Has she, to some measure, found an alternative to motherhood in Sisterhood and has this granted her some form of

bodily agency? The horrors of the possessed nun demonstrate the value and disciplining of the productive, if not reproductive, body of nuns.

Chapter 2

InHabited: The Wounds of Patriarchy on the Body of the Bleeding Nun

"We can be a dangerous memory. We can call the church to what they are professing [,] that they want to see changes made, but they don't happen."

-Sister Sally Hogdon, in an interview with PBS (Livesay)

Nuns in *Alucarda* (1977) are costumed in unusual, bloody habits[11] and Sister Irene, in *The Nun* (2018), prepares to spit the blood of Jesus in the face of the demon Vathek, who has taken the form of a monstrous nun.[12] Possessed nun films, like early gothic tales before them, demonstrate tensions within the church as it navigates the purity and danger of nuns to retain control over their labor.

Responding to decades of public condemnation for covering up the sexual abuse of children, in 2019 the Vatican finally ordered Church officials to report cases of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic Church clergy to their superiors. Subsequently, reports of the abuse of nuns by

clergy began to become visible in newspapers. Former editor of "Donne Chiesa Mondo" [Women Church World] Lucetta Scaraffia, for example, gathered hundreds of stories about the exploitation of nuns by priests for sex and labor and published an article on the material in February of that year and a few days later, Pope Francis publicly admitted for the first time the long history of priests and bishops sexually assaulting nuns (Horowitz and Dias). In June, PBS reported that "a growing chorus of nuns is speaking out about the suffering they have endured at the hands of the priesthood, including rape, forced abortion, emotional abuse and labor exploitation" and that "the Vatican can no longer ignore the scandal" (Livesay). Rapist priests, reminiscent of the villains in eighteenth-century gothic novels like Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), are an officially-admitted reality.

When becoming a nun, a woman is ceremonially consecrated in marriage to Christ and she takes three vows: poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows render her especially vulnerable to abuse as she is trained to be obedient to male clergy, all of which are her superiors, and she has no financial resources to leave an abusive environment. Additionally, if she is raped, she has unwillingly broken her vow of chastity and is typically counseled that the sexual assault is her fault, resulting in additional emotional trauma (Livesay). The Church organization places the nun in a precarious position and, through emotional, economic and ideological manipulation, set up the nun's body for exploitation. The horrors of this exploitation are expressed in possessed nun cinema, popular within the subgenre of "nunsploitation," as demons make visible and especially violent the conscription of nuns' bodies in ways that mimic the church and male clergy's exploitation of these women.

While the previous chapter demonstrates the ways women's bodies are targeted for control in preconception ideology, this chapter explores the ways nuns' bodies, from medieval

and gothic narratives to recent films, are exploited for both sexual and productive labor by the Church. Chapter one addresses specific cultural ideas which act to control women while the present chapter is concerned with the power of an institution. Furthermore, nuns are in a profession, one which requires a vow of chastity, meaning they will never be mothers. Nevertheless, they are shown to be valuable for their productive labor and the tension related to losing access to that labor is expressed in demonic possession films.

This chapter will investigate the medieval and gothic origins of the possessed nun variant of exorcism narratives through their representation in modern films. My discussion of nun possession film from 1922 to 2018 will show how this figure is used to reinforce cultural concepts of the abject female body and the legitimation of institutional appropriation of women's labor. Early possession stories in the Bible and in the medieval genre of hagiography provide a foundation for exorcism as the legitimization of Church power on earth. Gothic tales of bleeding nuns, which place the nuns back into an imagined version of the medieval past, further develop possession stories by adding a gendered aspect to the power struggles they represent and speak to the shift from a premodern, Catholic worldview to a secular one. To make the body of the bleeding nun intelligible, the tension between nuns as embodied women and supernatural brides of Christ and as earthly representatives of the Virgin Mary must be explored. Films considered in this chapter are from Europe as well as the U.S. as the figure of the nun is repetitive across cultures and the influence of the Catholic church creates continuity. Fictional nuns are complex symbols of both purity and danger, making films with their possession more complex and, in a sense, more transgressive than those about possessed laywomen.

As women, nuns are considered better suited than men in the helping and care-giving professions and it is labor in these fields which the church fears losing. In his discussion of the

importance of sisters as cheap labor for the U.S. Catholic Church, Brian Titley quotes a 1965 statement by Edward Wakin and Fr Joseph F. Scheuer that "By binding women into a community life, the Church has low-cost personnel for its schools, hospitals, and charitable institutions. Its extensive American operations would collapse without them" (9). Nuns also work as cooks, housekeepers and secretaries for male officials. Despite the value of their labor, nuns have limited mobility within their careers due to the Church's ban on ordaining women since only ordained individuals can hold positions of power (Murphy 596). Understandably, then, nuns report job dissatisfaction because of inequality (Ebaugh 410). While the medieval convent provided women with the possibility of an education and career not generally available to laywomen (Mellon 123; Warner 79), the strict patriarchal hierarchy of the Church has not changed in 1500 years, leaving contemporary nuns with little authority, career mobility or options to resist the exploitation of their bodies for labor. While some nuns have been resisting gender inequality since Vatican II, no structural changes have been made and outspoken nuns are chastised or forced to leave the Church (Brock, Ebaugh, Murphy).

In the gender hierarchy of the Catholic Church, men structure the lives and labor of female religious and dictate discursive truths about gendered bodies. It is "an institution in which the dominant symbolism is masculine;" both the divine and earthly powers are "Father" (Brock 474). Because they are not presented as being made in the image of God or Christ, women are made secondary and are aligned instead with the Virgin Mary and with Eve. Women's bodies are visual reminders of their status as sexual, sinful bodies in Church discourse. Covered with a modest habit, the nun's body is ideologically erased and her womanhood, patriarchally defined by sexual intercourse with men, is similarly erased by her vow of celibacy. Even her habit,

however, can not completely erase the fecund female body and its culturally ascribed monstrosity.

By reserving her sexuality for the supernatural being of Christ, the nun is in some ways a mirror of a demonically possessed person, whose body is also given over to an unseen, supernatural entity. Her traditional costume, a relic of clothing from the Middle Ages, is designed to thoroughly cover everything but her face and hands. The major difference between supernatural marriage and demonic possession, besides the dichotomy between good and evil, is that the nun has presumably consented to this union. Demonic possession, when contrasted with marriage to Christ, represents a supernatural rape. Most fictional possession narratives reinforce the concept of possession as present the activity as rape, because the possessed are powerless young women and the possessors are powerful entities coded as male. When the possessed person in the story is a nun, her possession results in a violation of her marriage vow. As her vow is to Christ, her defilement is not only rape, but also sacrilege.

As suggested by the sexual nature of cinematic possessions, Roman Catholic ideology closely connects women, the body and sins related to sexuality (Farrell 107). It is an ideology based on: first, a heteronormative, misogynist worldview which defines the sex object as the female body; second, on a dualistic philosophy that contrasts the body with the spirit; third, a strict, supernaturally sanctioned, masculinist hierarchy; and fourth, the veneration of a biologically impossible virgin birth. These tenets work together to construct the body of the Catholic nun as problematic and in need of strict control. As a woman, she is necessarily a sex object but as a "bride of Christ," she must remain chaste. Her calling is related to the service of her spiritual husband, but she cannot escape her physical body. As chaste women, nuns also cannot be mothers, but they are also closely tied to the Virgin Mary, a divine mother. These

contradictions and stresses render the body of the nun abject. This abjection is especially pronounced when the nun's body is visibly sexual or porous, as occurs when she is bleeding. Ann Williams observes that the choice of the active noun, ""bleeding" implies the horrifying disruptiveness of "female" materiality. Certainly the nun, who has sworn to renounce sexuality and motherhood, does, in breaking her vows and murdering her lover [in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*], embody such a horror of the dangerous female (n4). The blood on her habit or veil signifies what is hidden by polluting what should be a pure surface (Kosofsky Sedgwick 259) and her rejection of virginal obedience (Mulvey-Roberts 35). The "bleeding nun" is a recurrent character in gothic horror from the eighteenth century to the present and demonstrates cultural fears of women's bodily rebellion.

Bleeding, possessed nuns, and their exorcism stories are shaped by the cultural contexts in which they are created and reinforce Catholic ideology on three key points: first, that women's bodies are sexual, abject, and in need of discipline; second, Church hierarchy is legitimated; third, this hierarchy includes placing men over sisterhoods to reduce the threat of collective female rebellion against abuses. The body of the nun is consecrated to the Church but when she is possessed instead by a demonic force, her abjectified body contorts, rebels and bleeds. Priests, necessarily male, are called in to regain control over the uncontrolled female body. That they may do so successfully reinforces their power on earth, demonstrating that it is sanctified by the supernatural. These priests are able to quiet not only individually afflicted nuns but also convents full of unruly females. Possessed nun narratives are visual representations of the power negotiations that occur at historical moments when the gender power-knowledge held by the Church is significantly challenged.

Early to late twentieth century films of possessed nuns illustrate the containment and appropriation of female labor within the patriarchal institution of the Church. Häxän (1922) replaces Church power with that of the psychiatric institution in the early 20th century. Matka *Joanna od Aniołów* [Mother Joan of the Angels] (1960) and The Devils (1971) were made during second wave feminism and criticize the struggle for women's liberation. Both films use the historical events at Loudun, France to show the suppression of attempts by nuns to use possession performance as a form of resistance. Alucarda (1977) brings the gothic bleeding nun to the screen after the repeal of the Hayes code, a set of self-censoring guidelines applied to films from 1934-1968. Alucarda is a riot of blood, nudity, devil worship, Church depravity and lethal exorcism. It was produced in a historical context of the rise of horror exploitation films, a surge in popular interest in the occult, challenges to Church-defined gender roles by feminism and the legalization of abortion in the U.S. in 1973. Post-code "nunsploitation" films like Alucarda were plentiful in the 1970s and 80s, especially in Catholic countries like Italy and Mexico. Few exploitation or horror films about naughty nuns were released in the 1990s-2010s, possibly as a result of over-saturation during the previous decades or due to the decreased visibility of nuns after the requirement of wearing a habit was lifted by many orders in the 1960s and 1970s. Nuns have recently returned to horror films and the 2018 blockbuster film The Nun is considered in depth as the most recent film example of the bleeding, possessed nun. Though it nods to the changing social role of the nun in mid-twentieth century U.S. culture, it reinforces a conservative ideology which understands the female body as bloodily, permeably abject, subject to Church and supernatural authority, and as ideally dedicated to laboring for the benefit of the Church in caretaking professions.

Like the Paranormal Activity films, possessed nun films continue the genre convention of focusing on possessed white women. Häxän, Matka *Joanna od Aniołów* and The Devils feature only white actors in their casts. This decision replicates the incorrect but common assumption of a purely white medieval and Early Modern European past, an assumption also often found in fantasy fiction (Young 11). In Alucarda, the only non-white character is a Roma peddler who leads the main characters in the Satanic ritual that results in their possession, suggesting the potential for corruption and endangerment white women face from non-white men in white supremacist ideology. While it is the non-white man who brings evil in Alucarda, evil is held back by white European men in The Nun. The film contains a backstory of a medieval occultist summoning evil into his castle. He is stopped by a group of knights referred to in dialogue only as "the Church," but dressed in white tabards with red crosses and thus identifiable as Knights Templar (Upton-Ward 12 & 54). Salvation by Crusaders aligns the demon in The Nun with the middle east, replicating the trope of danger from a non-white Other.

Like the earlier films, The Nun also lacks non-white actors in its theatrical version. In a deleted scene, white main character Irene chats with a Black novitiate about her defiant desire to teach science as well as religion. The Black novitiate is present only for exposition of Irene's character and, as both the character and conversation are inconsequential, their removal from the final version is insignificant. The decisions to cast white women for all of the possessed nuns reproduces possession as a threat to control over the valued bodies of white women.

Early Narratives of Possession and Power in Christianity

Stories about Christian exorcism are, and always have been, evangelical projects. These narratives tell what anti-social behavior looks like, which bodies are open to external

appropriation and, at the same time, who has the power to cast out corruption and reinstate those bodies back into the social order. The ability to exorcise is evidence of legitimate access to holy power and dominion over the demonic. In their study of possession films after *The Exorcist* (1973), Olson and Reinhard find that the narratives are less about the (passive) suffering and salvation of the possessed but the (active) suffering and salvation of the exorcist and the restoration of normal social relations. In his investigation of historical cases of possession in Europe, Foucault finds that "at the center of the scene of possession and the mechanisms of possession is the holy figure with the powers of the priest (and so the powers of direction, authority, and discursive constraint)" ("Abnormal" 206). The ability to exorcise denotes authority in both popular and canonical Catholic narrative.

Catholicism, the major Christian tradition surviving from the pre-modern western world, contains a strict social hierarchy which is recreated in possession stories: God the Father is supreme, his mortal male emissaries on earth are faithful priests who rightly wield his power, and both lay and women religious are subject to their discipline and authority. This hierarchy and the Catholic rite of exorcism as codified in the *Roman Ritual* form the basis for the possessed nun films discussed in this chapter. However, the possession narrative pre-dates the invention of film and differences from the pre-film narratives reinforce the gendered dimension the film stories develop and establish that gender was not originally a key aspect of exorcism narratives, giving further importance to the consistencies in possession films.

A successful exorcism validates the authority of not only the exorcist but also of the ideology he represents and the rituals he is allowed to perform. The Bible is the original source of exorcism narratives in Christianity and provides the original template for possession fiction, especially the crucial and hierarchical relationship between the possessed and the exorcist. While

the Old Testament does not contain mention of any exorcisms, the New Testament has multiple instances of such activities. In biblical stories, the act of exorcising the possessed is used to publicly demonstrate first, the power of Christ, and second, the terrestrial authority wielded by those who can exorcise in his name. Olson and Reinhard, following Father Richard Woods, read biblical exorcisms as demonstrating good versus evil to define morally acceptable behavior and to inspire belief in and the worship of god (9-10). This reading is useful but crucially misses the importance of power in the relationship between the possessed and the exorcist. The exorcist uses the act of exorcism to affirm their greater social power by publicly mastering the body of the possessed. This social power is based on the exorcist's belief and reified by supernatural acknowledgement of the veracity of that belief. Biblical tales demonstrate that the exorcist must be a true Christian believer (Acts 19:13) and that their power derives from the invocation of Jesus (Acts 16:16). This trope continues into exorcism cinema, with the exorcist, when he is a believer and (re)integrated into the dominant patriarchal belief system, invested with the ordering authority of hegemonic culture, able to wield that power to subdue the disordered, deviant body of the possessed.

A brief look at medieval hagiography revels that, while exorcism as legitimization is an early use of the genre, gendered power struggles are not. Hagiography in the middle ages continued to use exorcism narratives to demonstrate the power of Christ and of his emissaries on earth. In her study of medieval accounts of possession, for example, Caciola finds that possession is marked by a disintegration of self and the powers of the saint, through exorcism, bring social reintegration (235). This saint can be either male or female, as can be the possessed. These stories, like those in the Bible and in later films, are not about the plight of the possessed but rather serve as argument for the legitimacy and glorification of the exorcist. While the

possession stories in neither the Bible nor hagiography contain the consistent gender dynamic of possession films, the exhibition of the Catholic hierarchy described above is a trope of the exorcism genre consistent into later narratives.

The Bleeding Nun and the Gendering of the Possessed

While there are a handful of stories concerning possession from 19th century gothic fiction, it is the abject body of the gothic "bleeding nun" that contributes the most to 20th and 21st century possession horror cinema. In stories like *Melmoth the Wanderer, Lois the Witch* and "Thrawn Janet," a struggle between belief and disbelief in the supernatural is depicted through the actions of the possessed and their credulous onlookers, searching for explanations. The first two examples reject the supernatural while the second reluctantly accepts it. The majority of exorcism films continue to play with belief versus disbelief and the supernatural versus science, but typically resolve on the side of the supernatural as the cause of possession. The conflict between religion and the rational in current films has its roots in the origins of the gothic genre: Hoeveler argues that "it is precisely in this historical gap- between the decline of magic and the rise of science- that the gothic imaginary emerges" (8). Exorcism films re-enact this conflict and the magical, premodern worldview returns in these narratives. Though rooted in the early gothic genre and present in other literary genres, a worldview understanding the female body as porous, uncontrolled and a threat to patriarchy makes the woman the monster of the story.

That it is women's bodies that are typically the ones possessed positions them firmly in an earlier worldview which rejects scientific arguments for the equality of the sexes. Instead, it is a worldview that looks to the inferiority and fallibility of Eve, born of Adam's rib and having succumbed to temptation. Women instead exist in an ideological landscape where supernatural,

patriarchal power may be wielded by the men who believe in this power to discipline and return unruly female bodies to their proper roles as chaste daughters and nuns, or as loving, self-sacrificing mothers. It is not doctors or psychologists who can save the day in *The Exorcist*; only faithful Catholic priests can restore foul-mouthed, convulsing Regan to the position of dutiful daughter to her recently humbled mother. Science may be unable to contain the pre-modern, female body but supernaturally empowered patriarchy is able to bring it into submission.

Successful exorcism requires a belief in the power of religion as more potent than that of science, and the body itself as porous to supernatural forces, despite scientific notions of a closed body. To be possess-able is to be porous, in the terminology of Charles Taylor and, later, Diane Hoeveler. Taylor contrasts the notion of the "buffered self" as the form subjectivity takes in the secular, modern world, versus the "porous self" of the supernatural, premodern world. Hoeveler applies this concept to the gothic and notes that the genre "needs to be understood, not as a reaction against the rise of secularism, but as part of the ambivalent secularizing process itself" (6). As one subgenre of supernatural gothic horror, possession narratives often depict the failure of biomedicine and science to cure the afflicted, prompting a return to a premodern worldview mode of care. Science is made secondary to faith in the supernatural and the success of the priest-exorcist proves his power over the monstrous female body. Secularization cannot be considered a completed project in the U.S., as evidenced by the increasing number of exorcisms performed in this country (Mariani).

The bleeding nun is an especially excessive female body, revolting to patriarchal ideology and in need of control, traits which align her with the possessed woman. The possessed woman is pure body; the self/spirit is vacated to make room for the demonic and all that is left of the afflicted is her body as vessel. At the same time, the bleeding nun is the female body

overflowing, with the horror of menstruation and fecundity made visible. Appearing in the gothic novels *The Monk* and *The Italian*, as well as various short stories and plays,[13] the bleeding nun is typically a peripheral or fleeting figure. She depicts a monstrous contradiction: as a nun, she should embody chastity, but as a woman she necessarily represents fertility (signified by menstruation), and as a bleeder, she further represents defloration. Bodily visibility and fecundity are in direct conflict with the proper habit and status of the nun as covered, cloistered, and celibate. With her female sexuality made visible, the bleeding nun threatens the patriarchal Church, flaunting its inability to contain her. Bleeding, suggesting both menstruation and defloration, contradicts the ideal chastity of the nun and her bleeding is the “stain of mortality” (Milbank 82). This juxtaposition suggests that, in patriarchal Catholic ideology, the body of even the woman who has submitted herself to God and Church is contaminated.

The nun’s visible blood, suggesting menstruation, childbirth and the loss of virginity is the defiled counterpart to images of a bleeding Christ. Removed from female sexual and maternal embodiment, the body of the nun should ideally have none of these types of bleeding visible. Cloistered and veiled, the nun inhabits an extreme interior space while female blood is a polluting expression of interior made exterior. She is a perversion of the bleeding body of Christ crucified or of the stigmatics whose wounds emulate his. Mulvey-Roberts describes these unholy bleeding bodies as "a sublimation of the horror and awe surrounding the crucifixion through which the bleeding body appears at its most sublime" (16). While the blood of Christ is an object of veneration, consumed at Communion during the Mass, depicted in iconography, used as the namesake of religious orders and encased in holy relics, the blood of nuns is an object of horror, a reminder of abject female fecundity especially troubling on the nun’s virginal body.

Hysterical Nuns: *Häxan, Matka Joanna, The Devils, Alucarda*

Possessed nuns in film respond to the cultural context in which they are created, making the nuns of each film differing representations of female monstrosity. Each of the films in this section feature nuns wildly out of control, apparently or certainly possessed by demons. These demons threaten the authority of the Church and its ability to control and coopt individual and collective women's productive labor. Although through their very existence, the possessed nuns challenge patriarchal order, these films do not provide useful feminist fables, as the *Paranormal Activity* franchise discussed in chapter one do. The possessed nun has deprived institutional oppressors of her labor, but she has also lost all control over her body and speech to a foreign, male-gendered force that has forcibly taken up residence inside of her. She regains a measure of bodily agency only when she is exorcised and returned to proper behavior by Church authorities, or when she dies. Possessed nuns act as monsters challenging social order but their rebellion is involuntary, and temporary. These commonalities exist between the five films discussed in this chapter, though they differ in release dates by almost one hundred years and originate in four different countries. Female monstrosity takes the form of mental illness, selfishness, obsession, and perversion but is always represented by the figure of the nun.

Containing the earliest film images of possessed women religious, the 1922 Swedish-Danish silent film *Häxan* [*Witchcraft through the Ages*] uses shocking imagery to show the possessed woman first disrupting medieval Church society and later, commercial trade. Initially banned in the U.S., the film has always been critically acclaimed, even when its horrific and perverse imagery were decried. *Häxan* is a unique documentary/horror hybrid, "an effective cinematic experience, crossing boundaries of not only genre and intent, but also of taste and respectability" (Kendrick). *The critical response to Häxan at the time of its release is summed up*

*by a reviewer in Variety: "*wonderful though this picture is, it is absolutely unfit for public exhibition." The combination of educational intent, horrific images and nudity confused reviewers, presenting an unclear combination of "high" and "low" art (Kendrick). According to reviewers, director and screenwriter Benjamin Christensen's authorial intention seems to vacillate between critique, education, and titillation. For example, title cards present historical information and are then replaced with images of nude women dancing and the somber psychiatrist of the 1920s sequence is juxtaposed with a possessed nun suggestively desecrating holy objects.

Christensen presents, overall, an argument that accusations of witchcraft were based on a misunderstanding of mental illness and on clerical debauchery, situating medieval possession claims in these two realms of authority. The argument is presented that women accused of witchcraft were either elderly and poor, "hysterics," or sexual temptations to male clergy. Each sequence focuses on the witchcraft accusation of a different woman, targeted as being too poor, too beautiful, or too mentally unwell. The cinematography highlights via close-up these various dangerous female bodies: the filthy and disheveled wrinkled face of a poor old woman, the prettily crying young woman with bared shoulder, and the wide-eyed and physically uncontrolled hysteric. While Christensen attempts to elicit sympathy for each of these women, making clear that the accusations of witchcraft are both false and vicious, but it is a tempered sympathy. Each victim remains othered from the audience and, somewhat at fault for the violent treatment she receives. This is achieved by showing each woman as physically or morally flawed: the old woman has grotesque moments as she blows her nose onto the floor and voraciously eats, the beauty ends up accused by the woman she falsely accused herself, and the hysteric literally cannot control her blasphemous and illegal actions. Though pitiable, these flaws

suggest that the woman victim is to have merited the violence she experiences. The unhappy ending for each woman is justified by her bodily excess and a failure to properly contain her appetites or actions within gendered social boundaries of expected behavior.

The final vignette of the film shifts female monstrosity from possession to mental illness, a position perpetuating the institutionalization control of female bodies outside of social controls. The film ends with a comparison between a modern hysteric and her medieval counterpart, a possessed nun named Sister Cecelia; both figures are dangerous because they threaten the social order and are in need of containment by the patriarchal institution of her time. The possessed nun disrupts the spiritual labor performed by women for the Church and must turn herself over to the Inquisition. Christensen suggests Sister Cecelia was mentally unwell, rather than possessed, and shows modern people with similar, but properly diagnosed, deviant behavior. This comparison focuses on a 1920s hysteric who must be sent to a mental institution as she threatens her family's standing with her inappropriate behavior and petty larceny, which she cannot control. This troubled woman is compared to Sister Cecelia who, with her body similarly not under her own control, desecrates the Host, dances wildly and steals and defiles a statue of the infant Jesus. The devil, bare-chested and with lasciviously wiggling tongue, compels her to act until she turns herself over to the Inquisition for bodily destruction. Intertitle cards explain that the supernatural misdiagnosis of witchcraft has been replaced by the scientifically reasonable and correct conclusion of hysteria. Hysteria was removed as a classifiable disorder in the 1980 release of the DSMIII (Devereux 19), having already been recognized to be misogynist by feminist prior to that publication (*ibid*). The institutional treatments for it, while probably less torturous than those of the Inquisitors, were often inhumane. Even though the vignettes suggest that sexually repressed or sadistic clergy were the cause of innocent women being charged as witches,

Christensen implies the uncontrolled female body is also dangerously monstrous, even if pitiable, by showing the character as a threat to herself and her family's reputation. Responsibility for controlling the monstrous feminine is shown to shift from the Catholic Church's management of supposed possession to modern psychiatry, caring for hysterics.

The medieval nun's transgressions listed above are violations of the body, hers and others', reinforcing the connection between possession and bodily discipline, as well as between the female body and monstrosity and the need for religion to control her body. Her first act is to accept a knife from the devil and use it to stab consecrated Host she steals from the altar. Wielding the devil's phallic weapon, she violently penetrates what is considered the body of Christ, according to the Catholic belief in transubstantiation. In addition to blasphemy, her crime is of queer, non-reproductive sexuality. She also steals the image of Jesus out of a shrine to the Madonna and child, literally ripping the baby from his mother's arms, and soils it with a substance that may be blood before carrying it off out of the church. This action violently coopts the role of mother from the supernaturally impregnated Virgin Mary. In addition to corrupting Christ as both rapist and kidnapping the child Jesus from his mother, the possessed nun contorts and dances before the altar, violating the proscribed bodily restraint and discipline of respectable femininity. Witnesses are disgusted by her excesses, as shown by their facial expressions. Each action positions Sister Cecelia as grotesquely appropriating a body that is in opposition to chaste womanhood: having a phallus, being a mother, and taking up lots of physical space. Being possessed/hysteric allows Sister Cecelia to herself possess a powerful body that is not her own. She escapes the extremely confining role of a cloistered nun.

When the possessed nun in *Häxan's* medieval sequence dances in the church, she inspires the other sisters to do the same and it is the threat of contagious, collective female rebellion that

continues to be a source of danger in later possessed nun narratives. Though nuns are controlled by church patriarchs, there is the threat of collect revolt and subsequent loss of access to their labor power. This is a threat that remains, despite other cultural shifts in the Catholic church and women's liberation. While the Midwives in the *Paranormal Activity* series are a powerful group of women acting to support the masculine demon, nuns potentially have power to support themselves and each other, provided they liberate themselves from the control of male clergy. Both scenarios depict anxiety around the power of women working together collectively. In *Häxan, a* single, deviant nun refuses to control her body and rebellion spreads to others in the convent as a result. The rebellion in *Häxan* is short lived, however, and does not threaten the gendered power structure. The offending nun removes herself from the convent to seek bodily discipline at the hands of Inquisitors. The nun cannot enact increased, lasting physical freedom for herself or her sisters and the threat she poses is subdued.

Possibly as a result of the power of the Catholic League's censorship power over film, possessed nuns virtually disappear from the screen until the 1960s-1970s saw a proliferation of nuns in horror; popular occult horror films like *The Omen* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) brought Satanism to mainstream cinema (Cowan 167) and inspired imitation. While many of the films in the "nunsploitation" subgenre include references to Satanism, in addition to violence and queer sexuality, three also include demonic possession and exorcism: Polish *Matka Joanna,* British *The Devils*, and the Mexican film *Alucarda,* which presents the most visually intense depiction of the bleeding nun in the period. *The Devils* is based on Aldous Huxley's history, *The Devils of Loudun,* while *Matka Joanna* is a fictional sequel to the famous events at Loudun as imagined in the novella by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. The mass possession of the nuns of Loudun in 1632-1638 is only one of numerous examples of "convent hysteria" which occurred in the 15th

to 18th centuries in Europe (Evans & Bartholomew 104f). While partly based on documented history of the 17th century, the way each film presents events are shaped by the cultural context in which the movies were created. Setting these films in the past creates a sense of distance from the worldview of a world inhabited by demons, as well as a cynicism for the possession claims made by characters in the films.

Matka Joanna depicts a convent full of uncontrolled female bodies and a priest's attempt to discipline and reintegrate the physically excessive, and unproductive, nuns. The collective female rebellion in the convent disrupts the nuns' spiritual labor for the Church, making it an unsafe space to send unwanted women. Disciplining and or controlling the nun appears to be a drain on the male clergy who must repeatedly attempt to exorcise the Sisters. The film opens with the arrival of a severe priest, Father Józef Suryn, who has come to the convent to exorcise the nuns, specifically focusing on the abbess, Mother Joan, who is the most dramatically afflicted. The priest is shocked to find that Joan is delighted to be possessed, considering herself to be specially selected. She performs the expected bodily grotesqueries associated with the role: a backbend contortion, violent actions, blasphemous words, and seductive looks. Joan eventually reveals that she invited the devils in so that she would become important; if they are to leave, she wants to be made a saint, the only other way she can achieve importance. This request moves Joan from being a pitiable to a degraded figure. Actor Lucyna Winnicka, portraying Joan, shifts her demeanor and her facial expressions morph into a cunning smile, no longer depicting a tortured victim. Additionally, she uses the set, a convent room divided by a screen to keep a nun and her confessor separate, to flirt with and tease Father Suryn as she peeks and reaches between the cell-like bars between them. Father Suryn is so taken with Mother Joan that he sacrifices himself by taking the demons inside of himself. He even murders two men to ensure that he will

keep the demons from Joan. Joan's pride destroys multiple priests (Suryn is the fifth to try to exorcise her) and wreaks havoc in her convent.

Matka Joanna depicts bored and desperate nuns in full rebellion, destroying male clergy and denying the church their labor. The cinematography, setting, and costumes are restrained and severe, emphasizing the bleak ending of the film. Stark, treeless winter landscapes, drab period clothing and settings in both village and convent that are austere and primitive reinforce the nun's sense of being trapped in a dull life. While *Matka Joanna* criticizes the frustrating boredom of the convent, *The Devils* critiques the Catholic church's decadence. In contrast to *Matka Joanna*'s bleakness, *The Devils* mis-en-scene is blaring and flamboyant, showing the decadence of the Church and state via garish, anachronistic costuming and wild orgies, both royal and clerical. The film remains highly controversial and hard to find in its original, uncut form, though it has gained increasing critical acclaim since its release, being cited as Ken Russell's greatest film and lead actor Oliver Reed's finest performance (Cocks). Perverse, graphic sex scenes and blasphemy led to multiple edits, though the remaining cut is still outlandish and aims to shock. In *The Devils*, it is quite clear that Mother Jeanne and her "angels" are faking their possessions as they are coached by clergy in their performances of possession. Mother Jeanne is driven by her lust for Father Grandier and jealousy that he is in love with another woman, while the other nuns are spared from execution for heresy by agreeing to act possessed to further incriminate Grandier. Behind all of the trials, exorcisms, and violence are political enemies of Grandier, a symbol and advocate for the city of Loudun's freedom from Cardinal Richelieu's power grab in France. While the film's central narrative is about Grandier's downfall and the possessed nuns are merely a catalyst to his demise, it is only the spectacle of the nuns and the exploitation of their bodies by the Church and the camera with which this

project is concerned. These are the aspects of the film that have cemented its legacy as one of the most important nunsploitation films.

The Devils, filmed during second wave feminism and greater cultural attention to women's sexual liberation, depicts nuns as sexually frustrated women who attempt to use their special social status and vocation to gain attention but are instead used and manipulated by male authorities. The threat of contagious, collective, female rebellion, already noted in *Häxän* and *Matka Joana*, is again present in *The Devils*, though the degree to which the Mother Superior of the later attempts to influence the outside world has increased, mirroring the effects of feminism in the professional real world. Sister Jeanne and the other nuns have little screen time that is not dedicated to their interest in Father Grandier; they fantasize about, strain to see, mimic, and accuse him. In short, they are emotionally "possessed" with the thought of him. His accusers fight to assert their own possession of the women by demonstrating their greater power, both temporal and otherworldly. The accusers, Father Barre and Baron Laubardemont, demonstrate their greater control over the women by ordering that they be executed for attempted protection and solidarity with Sister Jeanne during her torturous public exorcism. At the last moment, the nuns are spared from execution so that they may share Jeanne's contagious affliction:

> Father Barre: God has revealed to me that these good Sisters are addled with the fever that torments the body of Sister Jeanne. The evil in her flesh has infected the young and innocent bodies of her charges. Sin can be caught as easily as the plague!
>
> Laubardemont: If Father Barre is right, my good Sisters, you may save yourselves yet.
>
> Father Barre: You would not be the first to see the light. You are tainted! The Devil is in your flesh! The evil spirit of Grandier has taken possession of your souls. Now you resist him, but soon he will have his way! You will scream.

Nuns: Yes.

Father Barre: You will blaspheme.

Nuns: Yes.

Father Barre: You will no longer be responsible for your actions. Denounce your devilish master Grandier! And we will save you!

While Barre enjoins the nuns to blasphemous acts, giving them license that they are not responsible for their actions, they are still not and have never really been physically free. This scene demonstrates not just that the nuns are never their own masters and are subject to whichever powerful men they must serve, but also the close connection between the body and evil. Possession is a spiritual malady, but also a bodily one. It is one easily spread among women; the men do not seem to be in danger. The possessed nuns demonstrate their affliction with a huge orgy and even sexual contact with men during it does not result in any new possessions among the men present. The men, unlike women, are not penetrable and neither their bodies or souls are subject to external control. This difference marks the men as legitimately sexual beings as their sexual activity does not result in either supernatural punishment or earthly reprimand.

The contest for women's bodily agency is reinforced by other scenes of possession performances that revolve around rightful ownership and use of the nuns' bodies. Jeanne's initial complaint to Father Mignon centers on the misappropriation of what rightfully belongs to God: "He speaks to me of love. Lewd, wanton. He plies me with caresses, lustful, obscene. He enters my bed at night and takes from me that which is consecrated to my divine bridegroom, Jesus Christ." At the public exorcism, this is reinforced by her account of Grandier and six of his creatures taking her and six of her Sisters into the chapel, where they were "compelled to form

themselves into an obscene altar… And were worshipped." Worship at an altar of women's bodies is the antithesis of the purity and holiness of worship at a sanctified altar, on which the Eucharist/body of Christ would be placed. Finally, the presence or absence of demons in Sister Jeanne is understood to be something that has physical evidence in her body: "Her very innocence is a sham, a mask of deceit devised by the cunning of Satan. Be assured, the fiend is silently lurking in some hidden recess of her body. This medical examination will reveal him and then we shall do battle." Jeanne is harshly disciplined by this examination, dissuading the other nuns from joining with her at that time. In this way, the examiners not only position her body as corrupted but disrupt the potential of collective resistance by the nuns under their own direction.

The threat of the possessed convent as the fear of collective female rebellion returns to the screen in *Alucarda*, which shows the complete destruction of an orphanage-convent as the result of deviant female behavior. While the previous rebelling nuns disrupted their convents, *Alucarda* demonstrates the full threat of the collective power of a community of women focused on disrupting the institutional control of the convent. Far more lurid that *Matka Joanna*, *Alucarda* is also far less "arthouse" in its flamboyance that *The Devils*, presenting a messy but unrelenting spectacle of nudity, screaming, and violence. Directed by Juan López Moctezuma, the 1977 Mexican film *Alucarda* combines Sheridan LeFanu's "Carmilla" with demonic possession tropes. *Alucarda* is decidedly a "B-movie" and though it had no major critical reception on its release in the U.S., it has become a cult classic, garnered comparisons to *The Devils* ("Nunsploitation Film"), and modern director Guillermo del Toro identifies it as an influence on his work (*Juan López*). Director López Moctezuma had several collaborations with *avant-garde* director Alejandro Jodorowsky and López Moctezuma's earlier film, *La mansión de la locura* (1971), won film festival awards in Europe (Wilt). *Alucarda* received far less notice

and was released under multiple titles (including *Innocents from Hell* and *Sisters of Satan*) with marketing emphasizing the plentiful nudity in the film.

Alucarda depicts the denial of access to women's bodies for both productive and sexual labor as a result of rebellion and possession. Set in an isolated and weirdly cave-like convent and orphanage compound, the story concerns the brief but intense relationship between orphans Justine and Alucarda (standing in for Carmilla/Mircalla). The two make a blood oath to each other, unknowingly in the tomb where Alucarda was born, and accidently unleash an evil force which progressively possesses them. Back at the convent, they mock the nuns, chant "Satan" and undergo a blood ritual initiation, involving nudity, bending into a backward arch (like many possessed bodies) and an appearance by Satan himself. Multiple nuns and orphans have convulsive and verbal fits after this: the misdeeds of the two girls is infectious, as in earlier films and historical precedent, and their uncontrolled bodies and words pollute the other females around them. The head priest, while self-flagellating with a group of nuns, calls for an exorcism for Justine and Alucarda. He is contrasted with the rational, possession-disbelieving local doctor. Justine, naked and bound to a wooden cross, dies in the process as she is repeatedly pierced and penetrated by nuns. Later, Justine's body disappears and is discovered in a grotesque, womb-like coffin full of blood in the tomb where Alucarda was born. This placement locates the transition into monstrous embodiment for both women in a potent tomb-womb. For Justine rising from the coffin, her perverse re-birth turns her into a close kin of Alucarda and similar violent monstrosity. Justine's possessed body rises and immediately and fatally attacks a nun. Alucarda terrorizes the nuns and orphans and eventually the entire compound is destroyed in flames. Reminiscent of burning witches at the stake during the early modern witch hunts, the flames

purify the space of the monstrous, feminine evil that had threatened to collectively rebel and throw off control by male clergy.

Though the strange convent worships a male deity and is led by male clergy, to who the female religious are clearly subordinate, a young woman who has chosen to embrace the devil, as well as lesbianism, is able to bring them all down. The destruction of bodies and space destroys or disrupts the female labor patriarchal institutions exploit, making real the threat of loss expressed by the drama of possession. The nuns are no longer able to provide spiritual labor or childcare and their charges will not grow up to be useful servants, wives or female religious. While this disruption suggests possession as resistance to patriarchy, the female community is destroyed, and its members are killed or displaced. In this narrative, rebellion is punished, and no alternative society is imaginable. Patriarchal control is so thorough and all-pervasive both in and outside the church that only a significant ideological shift, not demonstrated or even named in these films, would provide escape for the nuns.

The strange, bloodied habits of the nuns again use the gothic trope of the bleeding nun to reveal to the viewer the always-present bloody abjection of the female body, even when that body is fully clothed and covered. Confined, possessed, disciplined by the priest and ultimately destroyed in the convent, the bleeding nuns of *Alucarda* hearken back to their predecessors and re-present the inescapability of the abject status of the fecund, female body under misogynistic patriarchy. The nuns in *Matka Joanna* and *The Devils* wore more traditional white habits, visually striking in their starkness and cleanliness against gray backgrounds, in the former, and dirty white tile walls in the later. Textured like bandages, the white, three-tiered dresses worn by the nuns in *Alucarda* have no precedent in the habits of any Catholic order, indicating the fantastic nature of this convent. A habit is worn to indicate membership in a specific order and

these nuns belong to the larger community of women who bleed i.e., menstruate. Each nun's dress has a different bloodstain on it, suggesting that the stains are the result of bleeding bodies and not a strange pattern in the fabric. While each stain has a different shape and size, they all look to originate from hidden wounds near the stomach/womb on the second tier and from between their legs for the stain on the third and lowest tier of the dress. These strange costumes give the blood a clearly reproductive origin, suggesting either potentially lethally heavy menstruation or miscarriage. The costumers are not drawing on reality with the design and have deliberately chosen a wounded look for the habits. That each outfit has a different bloodstain reinforces the suggestion of a wound or bloody reproductive "failure." The costuming suggests that either membership in the church is responsible for the damage done to the nuns' bodies or that it is not enough to contain and hide the bleeding of the female body. The gauze-like appearance of the fabric adds to the impression of wound-ness and had the nuns of *Alucarda* been wearing white, traditional habits like the nuns in *Matka Joana* or *The Devils* the element of the eternal female wound would be missing. The black fabric of other more realistic habits would hide these bloodstains and by choosing a white base, the film's habits make visible what could be present but is hidden on the habits of Catholic nuns.

Alucarda is far more a supernatural horror film and less a drama than the other films discussed in this section, lacking much of a plot or characterization, so the struggle for the control of female labor is more graphically visible on female bodies and its apocalyptic ending a more thorough condemnation of the Church. *Alucarda* criticizes Catholicism and suggests no alternative social system capable of controlling dangerous women to replace it but rather the complete destruction of the Church itself. Like *The Exorcist*, within the film's universe, possession and the devil are real and doubting scientific doctors are proved wrong by religion.

However, while religion saves the day in *The Exorcist,* it is powerless to stop the rebellious Alucarda. This is a stark difference from the outcomes for the other possessed nuns discussed earlier in this chapter. In *Häxän, Matka Joana,* and *The Devils*¸ "possessed" women are manipulated, categorized as deviant, and confined by the patriarchal institutions of medicine, religion, and government. The taming of the rebellious bodies of the nuns and their reinsertion into the social order are the struggle for and transfer of power over female labor and bodies made visible: from religion to medicine in *Häxän,* from female to male religious in *Matka Joana,* and from local to centralized government in *The Devils*.

Possessing the Vessels of the Old World: *The Nun*

While the bleeding nun continues to appear in low-budget horror films of the 70s and 80s, she does not return to a major theatrically released film until 2018, coinciding with both increasing attacks against women's bodily autonomy and a rise in conservative Christianity in the U.S. The fifth film of the successful *Conjuring* Universe horror film series (2013-Present), *The Nun* depicts the competition between the Church and the demonic for possession of the bodies of nuns in the form of an action-filled, possession film. *The Nun* received generally poor critical reviews, for example: "sub-par and cliché" (Rozsa), "Employing just about every trick from the Hammer Horror playbook without wasting time trying to make any sense" ("Haxan"), and "an unholy mess" (Ebiri). Despite this, the film has the highest worldwide box office gross of any of the *Conjuring* films to date, having brought in over $365 million ("The Nun"). Set in 1952 Romania, the story centers around the Vatican-ordered investigation of a remote convent by a priest specializing in investigating miracles, Father Burke, and a young novitiate, Irene, who has a history of visions of the Virgin Mary. They are joined by an amorous French-Canadian,

nicknamed Frenchie, living in the area and who serves as their guide, comedic relief, a foil to the novitiate's future vow of celibacy, and a connection to the first *Conjuring* movie. The trio investigate the strange happenings within the convent and are menaced by the demon Valak, also the antagonist of *The Conjuring 2* (2016), until they can successfully banish the demon back to hell via an underground passage.

The conflict in the story is a clear-cut battle between good and evil, with both sides being represented by nuns, a significant difference from earlier possessed nun films and one indicating more agency and nuance for women religious. The nun, a rare sight in post-Vatican II U.S. and a symbol of opposition to modernity and women's liberation, is an exotic Other, even when not monstrous, and her strangeness opens her up to use by both sides of the struggle. There are significant differences between good and evil nuns in the film, however. Crucially, the nuns bleed when they are on the side of evil but do not when they serve the forces of good, reinforcing the contrast between the good, contained woman versus the monstrous, uncontained woman. Evil is also represented by Valak, who takes the form of a terrifying nun with enlarged, bloody teeth, black lips and sunken eyes. Valak, and the nuns of this convent, wear traditional black habits and veils with white wimples, drawing attention to their faces while blurring their bodies into the dark interior sets. This corpse-like figure is a modern incarnation of the bleeding nun as it inhabits a dark, gothic setting and attempts to hide among the living nuns as it torments everyone who enters the convent. The demon's approached is always signaled in the soundtrack by deep, moaning, male voices, suggesting a masculine gender. This gendering is confirmed when Father Burke finds books revealing that the demon is "the Defiler, the Profane, the Marquis of Snakes." Valak was initially summoned by a medieval duke and violently brought up through the stone floor of the castle, in a monstrous chthonic birth. Catholic knights invaded the castle and sealed

Valak away, using a few drops of the blood of Christ. As potent as the blood is, according to the narrative, it is only perpetual prayer, i.e. spiritual labor, by nuns that keeps the demon contained. The labor of celibate women is needed to prevent a second demonic birth, connecting the female body to corporeal generation. Bombing during World War II damages the castle and Valak is released; though with only limited power, and is able to stalk the nuns, disguised as one of them. To enter the world outside the convent, Valak must possess the body of a nun because, in the language of the film, it "needs a vessel." Locating the ultimate source of the evil in the Middle Ages recalls other possessed nun narratives and ties *The Nun* more closely to the setting and occultism of gothic literature like *The Monk*, as well as to historical instances of convent mass hysteria. By having the demon be released during World War II, the film recalls Pazuzu's release in *The Exorcist.* Though far less ancient than the civilization of the Levant, Europe, and especially Eastern Europe, represents the "Old World" which was devastated by the war. The war marks the transition of the U.S. to dominance as a world power as Europe lost power. Romania, in particular, was economically struggling in 1952 as a newly communist country paying war reparations and occupied by the Soviet Union. Besides it's popular association with vampires, Romania is for these reasons an ideal location for the release of an ancient and Other evil which must be confronted by a relatively liberated young novice from the U.S.

The Nun repeatedly depicts bleeding nuns as part of its conservative, Catholic ideology both continuing the tradition of the bleeding nun and demonstrating ambivalence about the purity of their bodies. The first bleeding nun in the film is the last nun left before the trio of protagonists arrives, who hangs herself to avoid becoming Valak's vessel. She has committed the mortal sin of suicide in the eyes of the Church, an unforgivable rejection of God's gift of life. Having sworn herself to the Church, this action is even more damning as her body is no longer

completely her own in the patriarchal hierarchy of the institution. Any possible benefit or labor that her body could have provided is disrupted through her self-destruction. Though Frenchie finds her body and moves her to the convent's cold storage, neither the nun's body or blood are at rest. The blood puddle which formed under her hanged body continues to stay wet and to grow while her body moves and attacks under Valak's influence. Her unquiet corpse is a reminder of the dangerous, permeable female body, and her disembodied blood of the unclean menstrual/life blood of the bleeding nun. Both the blood and body, unclean and inappropriately visible, are used by demonic forces to bait and attack the heroes in the advancement of Valak's plot, suggestive of the way external forces may inhabit, control, and use the female body for their own purposes, a plot device used repeatedly in *The Nun*.

The hanged Sister is not the only nun whose dead body is manipulated by the demon and the repeated manipulation of the nuns' corpses, as available for external use in death as in life, is a significant deviation from most possession films.[14] The manipulation of the dean nuns' bodies is suggestive of increased political rhetoric positioning pregnant women as non-agentic vessels for unrealistically independent fetuses. Though the nuns are not being surveilled as prepregnant, as the women in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise are, they are shown as empty bodies controlled by an alien force housed within. In life, they were controlled by the church and the demon moves in to fill that absence after they die. Both the nuns and prepregnant women are portrayed as vessels available for habitation and use, whether this use is reproductive or productive labor. The reduction of pregnant women to vessels is a result of the proliferation of images of the "floating fetus" shown independent of the woman whose body it cannot survive outside of and which grant the embryo a false personhood (Boucher 70). The nun is shown to be a vessel through the manipulation and use of her body before and after death. This is an image

that is repeated during the film. The deeply veiled Mother Superior seemingly meets and converses with Irene and Father Burke but is later revealed to have been dead for some time. Another sister's body is made to attack the priest and she stabs him in the side with a cross, before her corpse bursts into flame after contact with holy water.

By possessing a corpse instead of a living person, the demon skips the struggle with the spirit of the person whose body it is entering and thus the pathos of a human losing control and agency. These nuns had limited agency in life; their sole occupation was to keep a vigil of unbroken prayer for the Church. In death their bodies are still co-opted in the battle versus good and evil. This appropriation is strongly reminiscent of arguments for independent fetal personhood which strip pregnant women of bodily agency in an attempt to control their reproductive labor. Though the nuns themselves are not legitimate mothers, a fact which seemingly distances them from the possessed women in chapter two, they can be inhabited by the demon as a different type of phantom fetus. This similarity further demonstrates the importance of female bodily control by patriarchal authority. Even with such different life trajectories, the women of both sets of possession films depict habitability and the contest for control over labor.

A persistent focus on the Virgin Mary, a female archetype of both productive and reproductive labor for the church, further reinforces the film's theme of pure versus polluted female bodies and the near impossibility of non-monstrous womanhood. As a virgin mother, Mary represents an impossible standard for mortal women in an ideology which considers both chastity and maternity ideals for women. "Accepting the Virgin as the ideal of purity implicitly demands rejecting the ordinary female condition as impure" (Warner 79). Nuns are instructed to emulate Mary, especially her chastity. "Chastity has always been the most defining characteristic

of nuns. It is believed to place them on a higher moral plain than ordinary women, whether single or married" (Titley 11). The high value placed on celibacy is based on a rejection of the body as inherently corrupt in dualistic Catholic thinking which divides and ranks body and spirit. As more aligned with materiality, this is especially damning for women as "the foundations of the ethic of sexual chastity are laid in fear and loathing of the female body's functions, in identification of evil with the flesh and flesh with woman" (Warner 79). Nuns emulate Mary with their chastity, but they never achieve her perfection as also a mother, while ordinary women may become mothers but only through sexual intercourse, marking them as sinful. The Virgin Mary is an impossible standard for any woman to aspire to and thus women in Catholic ideology are always marked with failure. At best, they can renounce their worldly accomplishments and agency, as did Mary Magdalene in *The King of Kings* as discussed at the beginning of this study, and act as humble servants.

Marian imagery is an important theme of the film, defining the center of the nuns' lives and identity, and also a key method of demonstrating the convent's defilement by the demon. Irene's visions, she tells Burke, always end with "Mary points the way" and while this is revealed to refer to the hidden relic they are searching for, it serves equally well as a mantra for the nuns of the Romanian convent and the focus of their spiritual labor for the Church. The film keeps Marian worship the center of the nun's activities as the perpetual prayer they engage in is only ever the recitation of the *Ave Maria* [Hail, Mary] prayer. While perpetual adoration is technically a vigil kept over the Eucharist by different lay and religious people in shifts, the film uses the term to refer to the continuous spoken prayer of the nuns in their inner chapel. Perpetual adoration may be performed by using many different prayers, bible readings, or contemplation but the writers chose to have the nuns only speak the *Ave Maria*. Additionally, while two

decapitated statues of the crucified Christ are shown, suggesting the loss of patriarchal power the demon threatens, statues of Mary have bloody tears or are awash in gallons of blood. Defilement of the female body is connected to bleeding and female bodies, even the most holy of them, inevitably bleed.

As only a novice and thus still removed from full insertion into church hierarchy, Irene is also shown to bleed and monstrously expand into multiple bodies, demonstrating the importance of full control over the porous female body. Just before the final confrontation, Irene herself become the bleeding nun, showing her own potential for corruption, despite her role as gothic heroine and her close connection to the Virgin Mary. Irene is lured into a pentagram painted on the floor and surrounded by beings dressed like herself but with bloody sacks over their heads. Like Valak, these nuns visibly bleed through their mouths, which are displaced vaginal openings in this conservative horror film. These beings menace and threaten chaste, female Irene and promiscuous, male Frenchie alike, suggesting the dangers of the bleeding female body to not only "good" women but also to patriarchy, reinforcing the need to contain and control these bodies. As only a novice, Irene is very much still an uncontrolled body. Until she accepts her final vows, she is independent and still able to make any decision for her future that she chooses, a freedom she will give up in when she becomes a full nun. Like many liminal spaces, the novice is dangerous until her complete incorporation into a new and permanent social identity.

Much is made in the film of Irene's liminal status as a novice, with her usefulness to both the Church and the project of defeating the demon in question until she takes her full vows and is safely "married" to the Church. Her own Mother Superior seems doubtful of the Vatican's charge to have her assist Burke and the Romanian nuns keep her at a distance. Valak, in the guise of the Romanian Mother Superior, supernaturally knows that she is still a novitiate and appears

pleased, suggesting that as such she will not be strong enough to defeat him. Irene's dangerously liminal state (she could just as well run off with Frenchie as fully join the church) is resolved when she asks Burke to receive her full vows just before the direct battle with Valak. The placement of this scene suggests the preparation montage of an action film, during which the protagonists ready themselves for a definitive, final battle. For Irene, this means fully physically submitting herself before Father Burke, performing a full prostration on the stone floor, and making a vow for a celibate marriage to the Church. Her prostrate form is visually juxtaposed against the cross of ashes on the floor that was once a nun; Irene's body an interchangeable replacement for the polygynous Church.

The importance of Irene's now safely controlled future sexuality is emphasized when the trio recovers the relic containing the blood of Christ, which they need to defeat Valak, suggesting that only when she pledges her future spiritual and productive labor to the Church is she a good woman. Burke places the chain holding the glass vial of blood around her neck, stating that "only a true bride of Christ can wield something so sacred." Not only is Irene chosen to wield the blood, but also she is twice united with it. When she becomes possessed by Valak, hovering in a mockery of the prostration she assumed during her vows/union with Christ, Frenchie smears a little of the blood on her face to exorcise her. The union between the "bride of Christ" and Christ's fluids claims her body decisively for the Church and drives the demon out instantly. The demon had previously stripped her back and marked her with an invisible scourge and penetrated her body—but this possession turns out to be temporary. The Church is demonstrated to be the more powerful possessor of the nun's body. Irene hides the remainder of the blood in her mouth while fighting with Valak and spits it out into the demon's face; spitting sends the demon, a large amount of blood, and the waters surrounding them, back to the underworld through a hole in the

stone floor. This strange union between bride and bridegroom generates the power necessary to "unbirth" the demon and remove it from the human world.

The role of the male priest and Christ as blood shows that even a powerful nun cannot defeat the demonic; through this pattern the importance and legitimacy of the patriarchal hierarchy is reinforced. While Irene gains the strength to fight Valak when she takes her vows to become a nun, being a nun is not sufficient power to defeat the demonic; it is only when a nun assisted by men joins the fight that the demon is stopped. The group of nuns inhabiting the castle were unable to stop Valak or save themselves. Irene needs Burke's intellectual abilities to solve the puzzles involved with their quest while Frenchie's physical abilities are also crucial. Burke conducts the book research to find out the demon's name and characteristics and he is, patronizingly, also the one to solve the riddle of what Irene's life-long visions mean ("Mary points the way" to the relic's hiding place). Frenchie casts the demon out of a possessed Irene and later saves her from drowning, pulling her out of the water and giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In the end, Irene's contribution to the final battle is to serve as a temporary vessel and dispenser for the blood of Christ.

The blood of Christ is a repeated element in this film set, showing the power and presence of male authority in the church. A relic containing the blood of Christ is not unique to *The Nun* and the very different way it was used in *The Devils* highlights the conservative religious ideology in the later film. The King of France, in disguise, pretends to present a relic containing the blood of Christ to Father Barre in *The Devils* to assist in the exorcism of the convent. Believing the relic to be genuine, Barre is overwhelmed, and the Sisters are freed from their torment. The King then reveals that the relic is empty, demonstrating his awareness of the fakery everyone is engaged in. *The Devils* sets out to criticize religious and political institutions,

mocking a premodern worldview that embraces both magic and the permeable body. In *The Nun*, as in *The Exorcist*, religion returns to power and is the savior of the narrative. This gothic tale returns to a premodern worldview in which bodies, even after death, can be entered and the world is neatly organized into a strict hierarchy which orders humans, the demonic and the divine. Irene's early ambivalence about submitting to the Church (she teaches children about dinosaurs and science that the Mother Superior disapproves of and, in a deleted scene, is revealed to be considering leaving training) is overcome by witnessing evil. Possession is real, the blood of Christ has magical powers, and Irene chooses to formally enter and reinforce the social hierarchy of the Church. However, while these two films have different epistemological projects, both rely on the female body as the "somatic theater of possession" (Foucault, "Abnormal" 212); the site of struggle where different vectors of power can fight for dominance. Possessed women characters have little agency and are used, filled, and vacated to advance the agendas of patriarchal individuals and institutions whether for productive or reproductive ends.

Historical context of film production shapes the ideological messages of films and, over decades of socio-cultural change, the ideology expressed in *The Nun* is far different in that of *Häxan.* While Irene does formally enter the misogynist Church hierarchy, she does not completely lose her voice, giving the film a small nod to the increased agency of women in 2018 versus the 1950s. Depicted in contrast with the "old world" cloistered nuns of the Romanian abbey, Irene is young, active in the world and on a path towards a career as a nun-teacher, engaged with laypeople. Near the conclusion of the film, she, rather than Father Burke, delivers a prayer over the graves of the dead nuns. This action reinforces the sisterhood and solidarity of women religious in a positive manner. Though her character is set in pre-Vatican II Catholicism, her writers are not and her embrace of science and movement through the secular world positions

her firmly in a post-Vatican II context. Like the sisters interviewed by Brock and Ebaugh in their studies of nuns who resist control and silencing by the Church and those interviewed about their abuse by Scaraffia, Irene is not silent, though her voice still has a limited audience.

Conclusion

> "…the sheer profusion of bleeding nuns who inhabit these convents...suggests that there is no final haven, no escape from the realities of the physical female body. Women will always bleed; they will always be unclean in the eyes of the patriarchy and finally in their own eyes." (Hoeveler 110)

The abject female body, the subservient status of nuns in the Church, and the threat of collective female rebellion are the dominant themes in fictional narratives of possessed and/or bleeding nuns. Whether controlled by a demon or by male Church officials, nuns are never really in control of their bodies. Lacking bodily agency, their bodies are exploited for various forms of labor: whether that be spiritual, productive, destructive, political or sexual. Priests have their position in the hierarchy reinforced by their ability to perform exorcisms, which nuns are not authorized to do. Nuns, and never priests, are porous, possessable and in need of priestly disciplining, both of body and spirit.[15]

Mulvey-Roberts describes Catholicism as "a living reminder of a medieval past" (16) and the Church is an integral part of gothic fiction from Horace Wapole's faux-medieval *The Castle of Otranto* (1760) to the medieval abbey setting of *The Nun*. For Catholic nuns, however, the hierarchal, patriarchal control of the medieval Church is still a dominating reality in their lives.

> "Many members of the church, experts said, suffer from a medieval mind-set and consider the priests who commit abuse against nuns to be the victims of seductive

> temptresses. Since the victims in these cases are adults, the experts say, there is also a reflexive tendency to blame them. The reductive public image of the nun as existing to serve the priest and to pray quietly also undercuts those who speak up." (Horowitz)

As allegations of rape by clergy come to light in the popular media and even the Pope acknowledges the exploitation of nun's labor, it is clear that the gendered bodies of nuns are still considered Church property, available for use by male officials.

Imogen Tyler has argued that depictions of fictional monstrous mothers, as discussed by Barbara Creed, legitimate and reproduce real world violence against pregnant women, for whom, as mentioned above, the leading cause of death in the U.S. is intimate partner violence. Representations of fecund females as abject do not empower but rather reinforce physical and hierarchal domination of women and this is why the possessed nun matters. Rather than misreading possession narratives as rebellions of resistance to patriarchal ideology, these films must be seen as stories of forced entry into a vulnerable body and the subsequent abuse, manipulation and recovery of that body for labor enacted for the benefit of not the laborer, but for the Church. Possessed nun films reinforce and justify the exploitation of women religious and, by extension, all women.

The fictional bleeding and/or possessed nuns discussed above were not authored by nuns with a legacy of abuse and cannot be too closely conflated with the real-life examples of abused nuns. However, they do provide an entry point for discussion of how the ideological abjectification and domination of the female body causes real harm to women. Like the spectral bleeding nuns of 18th-19th century gothic literature, these "dangerous memories" return in spectral form to speak out against those who have harmed them. Gender parity within the Catholic Church is likely a very long way off, if it ever occurs, but there is some hope that by

increasing the audiences who hear their stories, nuns may suffer less abuse and exploitation within the institution.

Nuns are appealing characters for possession narratives and their presence provides a useful contrast for the possessed women of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Rooted in medieval church traditions and garb, nuns present a foil to the modern students and family members of the series. Nuns are observed and disciplined by the church, a predecessor to the male-controlled technological apparatuses of *Paranormal Activity.* Already possessed by Christ and the church, nuns are especially poignant figures for demonic possession, displaying a spectrum of labor coopted for good or evil. These differences illuminate the nuances of complex systems of patriarchal control.

Like Catholic nuns, Black women's voices have also often been silenced and the physical, sexual and economic violence they have experienced is not often made visible in dominant cultural institutions from biomedicine to popular culture. Black women have, until only very recently, been almost entirely absent from horror films as main characters, denying the narrative possibility of horror to make visible real-world violence and injustice in a fictional format. The following chapter focuses on the only film centered on a demonically possessed Black woman and the context of that film in both the history of horror film and African American and Black religious life at the time of its production.

Chapter 3

The Blaxorcist and the possession of Black women's bodies

The blaxploitation adaptation of *The Exorcist, Abby* (1974),[16] depicts the fear of Black women's sexuality and strength and their perceived threat to Black respectability, families, and patriarchs. The tension in this film is resolved through an exorcism which uniquely displays religious hybridity and familial control.

Among the many possession/exorcism films made in the nearly fifty years since the release of *The Exorcist*, only one, *Abby* (1974), has situated a Black person at the center of the narrative. The title character Abby fills a role similar to that in other films; she is a demon-possessed[17] woman in need of salvation by men with religious authority. Difficult to find, this film is only available on an out-of-print DVD or a poor copy on YouTube. The popularity and relative low-cost of "found footage" format films like *Paranormal Activity* and greater use of streaming services for digital media consumption have contributed to an increase in direct to

video possession/exorcism films in recent decades. Despite the subgenre's growth, the possessed character continues, with one early exception, to be a white woman. As the sole example of a cinematic Black woman possessed by demons, *Abby* is best elucidated through Kinitra Brooks' theoretical lens, one that is both Black and female and reflects "the racially gendered simultaneity of oppressions that plague black womanhood" (9). A "deep" reading of *Abby,* as enjoined by Freeland, highlights the near-absence of race in possession horror scholarship. In its uniqueness in an otherwise all-white genre, *Abby* should be considered as a complex text that, when considered in its cultural, cinematic, and historical context, depicts a conservative ideology regarding the control of women's bodies.

While the films that feature white protagonists express anxiety about white women's bodies escaping patriarchal control, *Abby* reflects the ways that responses to black female bodies are differ. In white supremacist, patriarchal U.S. culture, Black women are violently, and often publicly, controlled in ways that white women are not. The difference in bodily violence experienced by women is shaped by racism, in addition to the sexism oppressing women of all racial identities (Crenshaw 1242-4). These real-life differences have led to representational differences in horror films, as well.

While the absence of Black women in the role of possessed victim is partially explained by their long absence in film in general, and especially in horror films,[18] cultural denigrations of both Blackness and femaleness, and especially their intersection in the Black female body also explains this absence. The tension in demonic possession films comes from the conservative fear the patriarchy experiences at the potential loss of control over women's bodies since second wave feminism. However, Black women were often excluded from both women's liberation and the Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. With erasure in so many

spaces of resistance, the threat of loss of patriarchal control over the queered, Black, female body has been much less visible. From the use of antebellum enslaved women as "breeders" and as always available to rape by white men, to modern control via media images, economic and political disenfranchisement, disproportionately poor medical care, and domestic and police violence, Black women's bodies are subject to the intersectional oppressions of structural racism. Without the fear generated by a threat of loss of access, the horror films have focused on those bodies seemingly resisting control, white women's bodies.

Abby reveals a fear of Black women's sexuality and strength as a threat to male dominance within the family and to Black respectability, especially within conservative Black Christianity. *Abby* is the story of a preacher's wife possessed by an African sex-deity and exorcised by her father-in-law, an archaeologist, bishop, and adherent of Yoruba religion. Abby's possession shows her violent rejection of her husband, a preacher, and her adulterous sexual encounters. *Abby* is also uniquely characterized by religious hybridity, drawing from both Protestant Christianity and religions of the African diaspora in dialogue with the contemporary Black Power movement. "Saved" by the united efforts of her father-in-law, husband and brother in a syncretistic ritual, Abby, like the white women in possession movies, is returned to respectability within her family and church.

My reading of *Abby* is informed by its generic position as an exploitation picture, its relationship to other blaxploitation horror films released in the same era, and the ways in which it engages with the themes of *The Exorcist.* As a quickly and cheaply-produced film imitating a highly successful original and containing more salacious sexual suggestion than character development, *Abby* belongs to the blaxploitation-horror subgenre. Blaxploitation was a trend that both rose and fell quickly. Tzioumakis notes that "Between 1970 and 1972 alone there were

more than 50 films aimed specifically at the African American cinema-going community, while the trend increased further in the following two years before declining in 1975" (183). Mathijs suggests that the decline was due to a lack of interest over time from the intended audience for these films: "Black audiences were apparently more interested in attending "event" movies such as *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*, hence signaling an end to the short-lived, yet influential, exploitation cycle in the mid 1970s" (151). Both of the event-film examples listed by Mathijs were adapted for the blaxploitation genre, with the former being remade as *Black Cesar* (1973) and the latter, being *Abby*.

In considering *Abby*, I follow Brooks' "contention that even as the horror genre subverts and perverts classic hegemonic tenets, it remains dangerously staid in its supplication to weary racial and gender dynamics that constricts its revolutionary potential for cultural repudiation" (*Searching* 4). *Abby*'s reproduction of existing patriarchal supremacy is a key theme of the text. Playing into negative stereotypes of Black women, *Abby* shows a woman outside the bounds of respectability and defined, controlled, and made dangerous by her sexuality. As such, it does not fit into Mumford and Waters' reading of exorcism films with abortion subtexts (150-60). Rather than focusing on white futurity, either by condemning abortion or advancing preconception ideology, *Abby* shows Black women as irrepressibly and publicly sexual with no regard for potential consequences. The character's sexuality is independent of reproduction and focused exclusively on pleasure; Abby's sexuality both serves but also threatens male sexuality.

Brooks has argued that not only does horror fiction lack adequate representations of dynamic Black female characters, but also that horror scholarship and theory similarly lack a consideration of Black womanhood. Placing the white male as the central figure renders the Black male or white woman as his Other/monster but elides the existence of Black women as

characters worthy of consideration (*Searching* 2). The Black woman is too far outside: "she is the non-Other, the Other of the white male's Others" (*Searching* 8). Brooks calls for a decentering of the white male gaze that characterizes horror in order to critically explore the intersections of race and gender ("Importance of Neglected Intersections" 461). A consideration of *Abby* begins the necessary project of broadening possession theory to be inclusive of Black women.

Central to Brooks' work is bell hooks's concept of the "oppositional gaze," the gaze of Black women spectators who do not accept the subject position of the looking and desiring male or the white woman on screen. She argues that feminist film theory, especially that rooted in monoracial psychoanalytic theory, does not consider the critical and subversive potential of this gaze (*Real to Reel* 205). Additionally, this theoretical lens problematically erases the concept and importance of race and representations of race when the concept of "woman" is taken broadly and generically. To only look at demonic possession films as indicative of ideological notions of gender ignores the racialized component of all of these stories, while being aware of the racialization of possession further illuminates the complexity of the anxieties around controlling women's bodies.

Like bell hooks, I am concerned with the "popular public discourses of race, sex, and class," and with "what these discourses were saying and to whom," especially in regard to films marketed as counterhegemonic (3). Though *Abby* is part of both the horror and blaxploitation genres, it fails to achieve the subversive potential of either genre and instead reproduces hegemonic notions of Black womanhood and, through a familial, syncretistic exorcism ritual, situates women's bodies and souls as subservient to patriarchal control. Showing Black women's

sexuality as dangerous and consequently as something that must be repressed, the film reproduces the controlling stereotype of the "Jezebel" and the counternarrative of respectability.

Patricia Hill Collins' theory of controlling stereotypes of Black women is invaluable in understanding Abby's transformation from respectable preacher's wife to sexually aggressive wanton. Hill Collins exposes four stereotypes (The Mammy, The Matriarch, The Welfare Mother, and The Jezebel), all of which were created to control Black women's sexuality and fertility. In short, Abby becomes one of these, a "Jezebel." The "Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women," justifying sexual assault (Hill Collins 271). During violent moments of her oppression, Abby (and other blaxploitation women characters) also embody the stereotype of the threateningly strong Black superwoman with her excessive strength. Not only do the stereotypes represent a white male construction of Black female bodies, but they also justify oppression based on race, class, and sex. These oppressions intersect in the body of the working-class Black woman in ways that are not experienced by other identity groups. The representation of Abby's possession is made more meaningful when understood through Hill Collins' definition of the Jezebel and the long-standing construction of the excessively sexual Black woman.

As an adaptation, *Abby* closely follows much of the plot and memorable images of *The Exorcist,* though *Abby* is much more explicitly sexual and focuses on an unidentified sect of Black Christianity instead of Catholicism. More sexuality and diverse spiritual practices are also present in notable blaxploitation horror contemporary to *Abby*, especially *Sugar Hill* (1974) and *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973). Not possession narratives, both films feature strong women in control of supernatural Voodoo powers as the central characters. While *Abby* calls for controlling individual behavior for maintaining social status, the other two blaxploitation films subvert the

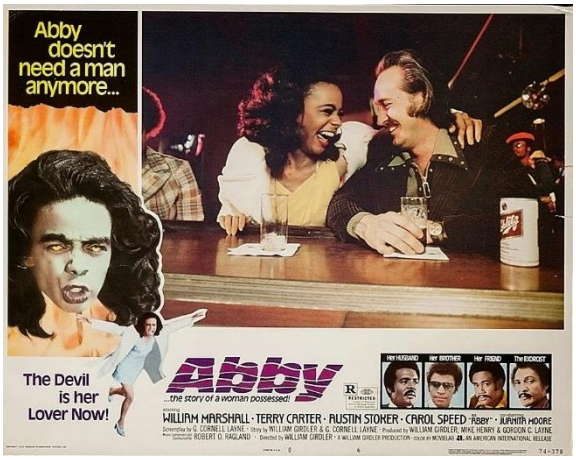
politics of respectability to an extent and focus on the power of individual women who have the authority to lead their communities. Abby, through a ritual laced with West African aesthetics and mythology, resubmits to the authority of the men in her family and faith.

The Blaxorcist: Exploitation and Reception

American International Pictures (AIP), the U.S. distribution company for *Abby*, began with popular releases in the juvenile delinquency exploitation subgenre and was a leader in the release of successful, low-budget films for nearly twenty years (Tzioumakis 135). AIP had tremendous success with its model of developing titles from sensational topics in current events, which were translated into quickly produced films and released into wide distribution before the relevance of the premise had a chance to fade (*ibid* 136). *Abby* was a successful amalgamation of current trends in: blaxploitation, which AIP was already successful in with the 1973 Pam Grier film *Coffy;* blaxploitation horror, like *Blacula* (1972, also from AIP)*;* and *The Exorcist*, the popularity and infamy of which was discussed in the introduction chapter. While *Abby* lacks both the glamor of *Blacula* and the cinematic polish, stars, and special effects of *The Exorcist*, it was financially successful. While certainly not a critical success, *Abby* was profitable, grossing $4 million at the box office, with a budget of just $400,000 (imdb.com), making it four times more financially successful than the better-remembered and regarded *Blacula,* also released by AIP. While *Blacula* has lived on through quality home releases and has William Marshall's excellent performance to carry it, *Abby* was only available as a bootleg until recently due to the legal threat from Warner Bros. of copyright violation.[19] *Abby's* greater success in theaters may be attributed to the more recent success of the film it was based on. *Abby's* December release was just a year

after *The Exorcist*, while *Blacula* traded off the capital of the Hammer Film Productions series which was, in 1972, on its sixth sequel, the entertainingly awful *Dracula A.D. 1972.*

An important part of the AIP recipe for successful films was based on marketing: "SELL with showmanship in advertising and publicity" (qtd in Tzioumakis 138). AIP was, from its foundation, very focused on and skilled at creating titillating advertising, and the promotional materials for *Abby* are no exception, including posters, lobby card galleries, a theatrical trailer, and a radio spot (Smith 9). Considering the brevity of *Abby's* theatrical run, the promotional materials constitute an important part of the film's narrative and reception. The film's trailer opens with a shot of a church, followed by scenes of pre-possession Abby with a female voice-over, "This was Abby...A woman loved, and in love. Until that night, when something evil came looking for a soul to possess." Happy, smiling Abby is tormented in her basement until the montage abruptly cuts to title credits over the face of possessed Abby, moaning in sexual ecstasy, seen from the point of view of the man she is on top of. This advertisement, in combination with the "R" rating promises a much more explicit film than was actually delivered. The film poster's tagline, "Abby doesn't need a man anymore...The Devil is her Lover Now!" furthers the promise of salacious Satanic sex while the secondary tagline, "Abby...the story of a woman possessed!" promotes the film as an adult version of *The Exorcist*. The radio spot includes the later line, in addition to promising "a tale of terror, lust and exorcism."



Many of the lobby cards[20] feature Abby dancing or flirting with men in a bar, in addition to images more directly recalling scenes from *The Exorcist*. The stills chosen emphasize both Abby's promiscuity and her rejection of her husband. The first lobby card depicts a moment from a scene near the end of the film during which Abby flirts with the only white patron in the bar before leaving with him to go to a rented room above the establishment. The interracial image casts Abby in the role of Jezebel by showing her as the aggressor in seducing a white man. It also potentially alters meaning of the tagline, "The Devil is her lover now." Shown rejecting her husband in the second lobby card, Abby is represented as both especially promiscuous, surrounded by three men, and unfaithful, pushing Emmett away (he is labeled as her husband in small photo at the bottom of the poster) in favor of others. Abby had been dancing and drinking with the other men in the image earlier in the scene and Emmett is in the process of confronting the trio. Abby's demon-induced, voracious sexuality is marketed as the star of the film.

Unsurprising for an exploitation picture from AIP, *Abby* was not well-reviewed at the time of its release. Gene Siskel gave it 1.5 stars and described it as "shoddy," while other reviewers labeled it "irritating" (Gross), "of less than routine interest" (McElfresh), and "unoriginal, unsuspenseful, amateurish and mediocre" (Cooper). A reviewer in Pittsburgh observed that it omits all the serious themes of the original and keeps only the "aspects which

can be sensationalized and exploited" (Blank) and a reviewer for the New York Times described *Abby* as "more silly than shocking even if it seems to take itself seriously." Cedrone, at least, gave it a hint of praise as entertainment: "*Abby* is almost a parody of *The Exorcist* and is much more fun because it is not nearly so pretentious as the Friedkin film."

Abby has not fared much better in the critical literature. Robin Means Coleman describes it as "rather standard low-budget horror fare," apart from its transgressive sexuality (137). Author, producer, and educator Tananarive Due describes the film as "a really good example of both fear of Black women, in general, but fear of Black women's sexuality, in particular." She notes that, "on the one level you could say she is sort of resisting her defined role as sort of a church wife, becoming possessed by a sex demon, attacking men through sex. It's a silly film," (Horror Noire Uncut: Season 1, Episode 4). *Abby* remains the only demonic possession film with a Black woman as the central character and, as such, it merits consideration and this chapter attempts to fill a gap in the critical literature, which has mostly ignored *Abby* and race. Olson and Reinhard are the only authors to date to have given the film more than a passing notice. Agreeing with both Means Coleman, and Due, they describe that it is Abby's dangerous sexuality which primarily merits critical consideration of the film.

Sexually aggressive, adulterous, desiring, and queered, the demon-possessed Abby threatens patriarchal and heterosexual order, as well as straight Black masculinity and honor. Abby is queered by the masculine demon inhabiting her female body, as well as her sexual aggression. Abby rejects feminine proscriptions on desire and makes visible her lust by initiating sex, rather than playing a passive role to a masculine aggressor. As shown in the trailer and lobby cards, she rejects sexual submission, eschewing the missionary position as well as marital fidelity. Though Abby identifies as a cisgender woman, the demon which invades her is referred

to as masculine, and this complicates and queers her sexual encounters with men in the film. In the marketing materials, Abby usurps and thus challenges heteronormative masculine sexuality. Unlike earlier blaxploitation films, including *Blacula*, *Abby* is not "a black avenger but rather…a danger to black masculinity and white morality" (Olson and Reinhard 51). Defying white prohibitions on their sexuality creates danger for Black people and Abby's antics threaten not just her cuckolded husband but also their community.

The Exorcist and the "Blaxorcist"

Unlike demonic possession films that depict anxieties about the loss of control over the productive and reproductive bodies of white women, *Abby* draws on religion, historical reference, notions of respectability, the importance of space, and controlling stereotypes to portray a fear of Black women's sexuality and its threat to masculinity. While the *Paranormal Activity* films express concerns for white futurity via the production of healthy babies, *Abby* is focused on the control of and access to Black women's sexuality for male pleasure, rather than procreation. This aligns the film more closely with the possessed nun subgenre, also expressive of fear of loss of sexual labor. Imitating *The Exorcist*, *Abby* uses the notion of unleashing an ancient evil, imagery of aberrant sexuality, a concern for maintaining familial relationships and gendered hierarchy within them, and the drama of the ritual of exorcism as a means of restoring the social order. *Abby* differs from the earlier film by moving the source of the demonic danger to Africa, replacing a focus on the exorcist's crisis of faith with a crisis of masculinity, and moving Abby's sphere of activity to beyond the walls of her bedroom. The religious hybridity of Abby's exorcism reinforces the film's blaxploitation generic categorization and further removes it from the Euro-centric focus of *The Exorcist.* This change also places the film into dialogue

with contemporary social justice movements for Black liberation and cultural decolonization, much like other blaxploitation films.

The successes of various civil rights reforms just prior to the production of *Abby*, especially Loving v. Virginia (1966) which legalized interracial marriage, brought Blacks and whites into greater social contact and shifted the potential for consensual sexual relationships, a shift threatening to white racists. Existing stereotypes of Black hypersexuality, employed by white supremacist institutions to maintain existing political, economic, and social hierarchies, were countered with notions of purity and Christian morality (Wolcott 24). Cultivating identities of respectability through membership in Black Christian churches provided a relative measure of safety for Black women (Horne 4). Though respectability provides safety, it also acts to circumscribe behavior and repress sexuality, though it is not without opportunities for resistance (Rhodes 202). Respectability in the form of "good Christian womanhood" functions as the primary controlling force for Abby in regard to her sexuality, identity, and social status.

The film opens with a going-away party for Bishop Williams, Abby's father-in-law, given by his university students before he leaves to conduct a dig in Nigeria and establishes his expert authority and his belief in both Christianity and Yoruba religion. Williams is transitioned from the U.S. to Nigeria by means of a montage behind the credits which aligns a bustling U.S. city scene with activity in an African village, connecting modernity to the "past," just as *The Exorcist* aligns Iraq with pre-modernity. Immediately transitioning to the dig, Williams discovers a vessel and by opening it, he unwittingly unleashes the demon, Eshu, that will possess Abby. The anthropomorphic vessel is opened by means of removing a phallic pin, located appropriately anatomically. Removing the vessel's penis transfers its masculine, sexual potency to Abby, a potency which threatens her family and church community, turning her into an excessively

strong, and sexual, superwoman. Williams appears unaware of the danger present in the vessel, smiling wryly at the figure before opening it, and does not learn about the harm he has done to his daughter-in-law until a phone call from his son several days later. The familial connection makes Abby's affliction directly inherited, connecting it to the intergenerational trauma of white supremacy. Eshu's release locates the source of the Black demon as being in west Africa, where people were kidnapped before being brought to the U.S. for enslavement, in contrast with Pazuzu's home in the Levant, considered the "cradle of civilization" in Euro-centric histories and anthropology. The use of an African origin establishes a conflict between ancient, ancestral evil and a modern patriarch who must conquer the dangerous Other they have both inherited and unleashed. Williams releases a danger from Africa, but it is also from Africa that he draws power and is ultimately able to save Abby. While this is a positive depiction of African-ness, the hereditary power seems to be only passed to male heirs.

Returning to the U.S., the film locates Abby as an ideal, respectable Black woman, deeply involved with her family and church; her possession is shown to be a threat to those groups. Abby has just become a marriage counselor, sings in the choir, and works with other women for the church where her husband serves as minister. She and her husband, Emmett, are shown moving into a middle-class suburban house willed to them by a former parishioner, and as they help with the move, Abby's mother and brother, Cass, are show as particularly close to Abby and Emmett. These details establish Abby's social and economic position and the health and happiness of her family. This focus on close-knit community mirrors other blaxploitation horror films but stands in contrast to the social interactions of Regan's upper-class white family in *The Exorcist*, which is more confined by the walls of their D.C. townhome and defined by class-conscious interactions with immigrant servants or at exclusive cocktail parties.

The differences between *The Exorcist and Abby* help to reveal the different social roles that possession threatens for each of the victims. In *The Exorcist,* Regan's possession threatens her future role as the mother of elite, white children raised within the context of a heteronormative marriage. She is positioned to replicate her mother's adult femininity, but without her mother's secularity and negatively portrayed focus on her career and resulting failed marriage. In *Abby,* the main character risks having her utility as a productive worker in her community and family negated. Her respectability as a preacher's wife, marriage counselor, and devoted daughter and sister are jeopardized by the wild sexuality of Eshu expressed through her body; she resists her prescribed roles but does not assume new ones of her own choosing.

Possessed by the Demons of History and Stereotypes

Abby's actions while possessed are more aimed at obtaining sexual pleasure for herself and less at shocking other characters, as are Regan's, and she rarely has witnesses. The viewers, of course, see every transgression. Abby masturbates alone in the shower as the demon enters her, metaphorically having sex with the demon as a method of facilitating her possession. Erotically depicted, the shower scene suggests consent and freedom for Abby, though the possession is later shown to torment her and she begs for help from others, suggesting that her other sexual encounters maybe non-consensual. Abby aggressively attempts to seduce several adult men, both successfully and not, and commits adultery. Her infidelity, in addition to a crude rejection of Emmett's sexual advances, challenges her husband's authority and her marriage while her sexual aggression challenges the masculinity of all the men she encounters.

Abby's transformation into a sexually insatiable woman turns her into a stereotype used in the denigration and control of Black women, thus connecting her to the historic rationalization

of slavery. While possessed, Abby slips into the dangerous position of Jezebel in relation to the other characters, which Collins defines as the "whore, or sexually aggressive woman" which provided "a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women" (271). Abby exonerates all the men around her for their complicity in her sexual deviance: from her husband's inability to please her to other men's participation in adultery. Rationalization for the violence done to Black women via victim-blaming shows this film's fundamental misogyny.

Abby follows in the tradition of eponymous and stereotyped blaxploitation heroines like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* (1974), both starring Pam Grier. Grier's characters in these films are more agentic than Abby, but still problematic. Calum Waddell notes that the blaxploitation female countered the "hypersexual, tough" male main characters in blaxploitation which were criticized by groups like the NAACP (174f). Instead, Coffy and Foxy Brown walk "a thin line between female sacrifice and strength, and a sexualized, fantasy Angela Davis figure, solving problems at gunpoint while dressed in revealing outfits" (175). Abby is less of a revolutionary figure and rather than challenging those who would dominate others in her Black community, she flirts and seduces individuals until she is restored to respectability as a preacher's wife. Actor Carol Speed's portrayal of Abby reinforces the lack of a challenge. She is gleeful while possessed and giggling before and after her possession, consistently performing the character as fun and ultimately non-threatening.[21]

White control of Black women's bodies, aligning with the demon inhabiting and controlling Abby's body, began with early cross-cultural contact and continued with slavery and the controlling stereotypes used to justify the horrific institution. Tamura Lomax argues that while it was white European fascination with Saartjie Baartman, publicly displayed as the

Hottentot Venus (16), that marks the beginning of white fascination with Black female sexuality, it was slavery that "made child molestation, rape, concubinage, exploitation, and ownership reasonable in the white imagination" (20). The construction of Black women as Jezebels was part of the rationalization of this treatment. As aggressive and hypersexual temptresses, Black women are always sexually available to white men, who otherwise, and with no moral conflict, see themselves as good Christians and patriarchs over white families. All of the controlling stereotypes dehumanize women and, as Brooks notes, "Black female monsters have a history that begins in slavery" (26). Jezebels are monstrously sexual and insatiable and rape of or intercourse with them is entirely the fault of the women. For the newly powerful Black men in blaxploitation films, this availability is a threat to maintaining control over their families, communities, and individual reputations. While the Jezebel is an asset to rationalizing slavery, it is a danger to Black liberation, and this informs the drama of Abby's possession and exorcism.

The connection between slavery and blaxploitation horror extends beyond the use of controlling stereotypes and is explicitly referenced in promotional posters for another AIP film, *Blacula*. Some posters include the tagline, "Rising From the Echoing Corridors of Hell an Awesome Being of the Supernatural—with Satanic Power of Sheer Dread. Chained Forever to a Slavery More Vile than any Before Endured" (Lawrence 56). Vampirism is equated to slavery and Blacula, renamed as such by his white "master," longs for freedom in both the original film and the sequel. The dehumanization, bodily violence, and loss of autonomy over one's choices and actions similarly connect demonic possession, like vampirism, to slavery.

Possession is ultimately the conflict between the self and a foreign entity over the control and ownership of a body, making it an apt metaphor for slavery. Black enslaved peoples, both men and women, were raped and were treated like breeding animals, being mated and lent out

for stud-services by plantation owners (Lomax 28). Lomax aptly describes this system as a "broken and demonic sociopolitical structure," one "in which sexual and physical labor are commodified along New World sex, gender, and racial lines, and where such distinctions may be exploited in competing markets for private gain" (23). The demonic capitalist system of the past is replayed in Abby's body and can only be expelled by calling on and reuniting with a culture enslaved people were violently removed from. Abby's safety and social status are only reinstated when she resumes a position of respectability.

While the control of white women was also important to slave owners, white women were coded as ideally possessing "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" as ideal womanhood (Collins 266). These are the virtues that Abby demonstrates at the beginning of the film and to which she is successfully restored through the combined efforts of her husband, brother, and father-in-law. As discussed in previous chapters, the demonic possession subgenre is typically a conservative one and *Abby* is no exception; the white filmmakers represent idealized respectable Black womanhood as a reproduction of idealized white womanhood. However, they also suggest a challenge to the possibility of a sustained reproduction. Suggesting that maintaining respectability is a vulnerable enterprise, the film reinforces white power over Black bodies by threatening the reliability of the safety provided by respectability.

First used by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church,* the politics of respectability describes a tightly controlled performance by Black church women that both protects and constrains. Focused on the individual rather than acknowledging institutional and historical racism, respectability does not address racism but is instead one survival mechanism for living with it (Joseph 85). The respectable woman is, in part, defined by her foil and by failing to be respectable, this foil is left

vulnerable to the effects of gendered racism. The woman who falls into either of the labels of Jezebel or bad Christian is left in a precarious position; isolated from community, she is made socially, economically, sexually, and physically vulnerable in a culture which sanctions violence against both Black and "deviant" female bodies, but especially at the intersection of these two identities.

The reproduction of idealized white womanhood by Black women as a survival strategy is in itself another form of bodily control mirroring possession, like a supernatural being, another self subsumes the personality and guides speech and actions. Often necessary for safety, code-switching to dominant, white cultural speech and norms involves hiding parts of the self in favor of being acceptable to an internalized white gaze. hooks notes that "Making it within a racist society often required and at times still requires both accommodation and assimilation. This often leads individual black people to develop a false self, one rooted in pretense and the denial of genuine feelings" (*Salvation* 23). This is not to imply that there is no opportunity for resistance within this process. Just as possessed characters often have moments in which they seem to enjoy the freedom granted by shifting blame to the invading demon, code-switching may involve a critique of the oppressor, despite the lasting trauma of the need for subterfuge.

Part of the control of Black female bodies is enacted by conservative denominations of the Black Christian Church, which provides a position of respectability, safety, and authority for Black women, albeit often in a narrowly defined role. Lomax notes that, "The Black Church is vital to upholding the black "nuclear" family and black patriarchy as seminal tools of black salvation and virtue. Moreover, it has been paramount in distinguishing between good and bad black women, making one the moral exemplar of the race, and the other her footstool, or, more specifically, the exemplification of moral bankruptcy" (32). While the Jezebel image controls

Black women in the dominant white culture, the failed Christian, lacking respectability, controls her within the respectability politics of the Black Church.

Abby dramatically enacts the difference between respectable and bad Black Christian womanhood several times in the film with her possession dramatizing the stifling control of narrowly defined "goodness." Pre-possession, Abby is shown to be devoted to her husband, his work, and the concept of marriage as a partnership working in service of God and the church. Not only does she demonstrate a commitment to her own marriage, but she is also shown working as a church marriage counselor, reinforcing her role as a good Christian woman and wife. Her close relationship with her mother further demonstrates her familial obedience and focus. In contrast, possessed Abby destroys her relationships and her own reputation. She begins her performance of deviance subtly, mocking other women in the congregation as she and several others work in the church's kitchen, a feminine space. The women around her laugh uncomfortably and gently chide her, attempting to bring Abby back into the space of proper feminine speech. Later, Abby more flagrantly violates feminine speech patterns by interrupting her husband's sermon. She coughs loudly and dramatically during the service after her beautiful singing solo. Husband and wife vie for vocal authority and refusing to yield after her time for soloing ends, Abby disrupts the space her husband, as preacher, rightfully claims. Unable to silence him and take over, she disrupts the entire church service. The camera cuts several times to the disapproving faces of worshippers, as well as her husband's annoyed visage. This disruption escalates as she knocks down the parishioner trying to help her and remove her from church. Shot from a distance, Abby's coughing fit is presented non-sympathetically as the viewer is more focused on the parishioners' repulsion than any discomfort Abby is experiencing. Abby

violently rejects the proscriptions on when she is to be or not be silent and demure in the church setting.

Further demonstrating her transition into a bad Christian, Abby also rejects the monogamy (Exodus 20:14) and wifely submission (Ephesians 5:22-33) required in mainstream Christian marriage. Abby's sexuality and adulterous activities are the main demonstration of her possession, but they also function as her primary method of enacting the role of bad Christian woman. Speed's performance suggests gleeful rebellion at times, as Abby uses her new power to control to both pursue and reject various sexual partners. Among the men she seduces is a member of her husband's congregation and who is unable to successfully have intercourse with Abby, because he can't stop thinking about her husband, effectively queering the scene. Just before Abby insults her husband's sexual abilities, he attempts to seduce her by quoting from the bible, specifically, from the Song of Solomon. Also known as the Song of Songs, this is a collection of erotic poetry and its inclusion in the film reinforces the centrality of Christianity to the couple, including in their sexual intimacy. Abby's rejection should thus be read as not only spurning sex with her husband and challenging his masculinity and legitimacy as the head of household but also as a rejection of the proscribed sexuality deemed appropriate for a good Christian woman.

Exorcising Abby in the names of Christ and Ologun

The film concludes with a syncretic exorcism that engages with West African culture to free Abby from the demon but also reaffirms her respectable, subordinate position under Black patriarchs. In contrast to the Roman Catholic exorcisms discussed earlier in this dissertation, Abby's ritual is a cinematically unique combination of Protestant Christianity and Yoruba

religion, connecting it to both blaxploitation aesthetics and Africanisms in the Black Church. Also unique is the trio of exorcists that each have a familial bond with Abby. These two variations from the demonic possession film formula make unique both Abby's possession, as historically potent, and her salvation, which is familial and syncretic.

Like other blaxploitation films, the exorcism in *Abby* presents diasporic African culture as a source of pride and power. Bishop Williams dons a dashiki and Kufi cap to perform the rite and through body language and voice projects a confidence, strength and faith far surpassing that of other exorcists discussed in this book. William Marshall reportedly argued for the Yoruba elements of the film just as he had argued for Mamuwalde's noble past and quest to end the transatlantic slave trade in *Blacula* (Veneman). These inclusions serve to remind the viewer of an often obscured but rich cultural legacy for the diaspora, bringing a measure of pride to these blaxploitation films.

The ritual also presents Black religion in a positive way, challenging earlier negative depictions in horror films. Means Coleman notes that "through a Yoruba-informed exorcism Abby is freed of her possession. The effect is presenting a Black religion in a markedly different manner than, say, many Voodoo-themed horror films which cast the religion as singularly odd, ahistorical, and evil" (137). Williams' urbane and urban performance also avoids the characterization of Black religion as irrational and primitive, a trend noted by Tanya Krzywinska of Voodoo in films that connect black (evil) magic and Black culture (197f).

Though cinematically unique, the exorcism in *Abby* reflects a long history of Africanisms[22] in various forms of Black Christianity in the U.S. In their book, *African American Religion,* Baer and Singer provide a summary of the scholarship linking African practices to Christian practices in the African diaspora in the U.S., Caribbean and Latin America (2). The

authors add the caution that modern day African practices have also been shaped by European contact and practices in the diaspora have transformed through acculturation, diffusion and in response to the horrors of slavery, making it difficult to draw direct connections (2f). While these difficulties of specifics exist, there is a general agreement that elements of African, especially west African, religions are present in the Black Church, though in different ways across different denominations. Further, Lincoln and Mamiya, in their study of multiple denominations of the Black Church, note the prevalence of links to African heritage in sermons and practices as a result of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (167). Whether practices originate in a pre-slavery past or in later movements to decolonize Black religion, Africanisms are certainly present in U.S. Christian practices. In *Abby,* Bishop Williams performs this syncretism through his unique exorcism ritual, establishing himself and the powers he calls upon as dual authorities in Abby's salvation. Calling on and directing the power of Ọlọrun (the highest deity of Yoruba religion) and the Christian God, he wields the tools of both traditions with equal gravitas and confidence. However, it is the large Christian cross, given to him by his students in the film's opening sequence, that is depicted as the most potent talisman, controlling Abby as the exorcism begins and remaining visible after the bishop packs up his west African garb and instruments, suggesting Christianity as the ultimate spiritual power. The inclusion of some references to Yoruba religion provides *Abby* with a measure of Afrocentric credibility as a blaxploitation film but the ultimate dominance of Christianity renders it non-threatening to existing hegemonic religious institutions.[23]

Also unlike other female possession films, is the role of family in the exorcism ritual. While familial connections beyond symbolic are unsurprisingly absent in Catholic rituals performed by celibate clergy, family is a crucial element in Abby's release. Bishop Williams

functions as the head of a patriarchal trinity that must work together to exorcise Abby. This trinity is comprised of the bishop, Abby's husband Emmett, and Cass, Abby's brother. As Abby's mother raised Abby and Cass as a single parent, Bishop Williams is the stand-in or actual father of all the other exorcism participants. Cass is never shown to be particularly religious and he is, as a police officer, a connection to the secular world and secular authority. Bishop Williams must draw on the strength of all the men in Abby's life who, past, present, and future, possess control over her behavior and social respectability. He must then unite symbols of past and present Black communities, in the form of Yoruba religion and the Black Christian Church, to reintegrate Abby into subservience to Black masculinity and good Christian womanhood.

Mirroring *The Exorcist*, Williams releases the demon by ignoring the spiritual dangers of his secular work in a foreign context and these dangers then threaten women in their homes, what should be their feminine safe spaces. In both films, demons possess women as a way to challenge patriarchal power. In contrast to the role of the priest in *The Exorcist*, Williams must directly engage with the ancient culture he disturbed to reaffirm his authority over women's bodies and he must engage the assistance of other men. To be successful, he must include Yoruba religion in his effort to discern, drive from the home, and exorcise Eshu. Abby's possession is so powerful that he cannot overcome it alone. This process recalls historic struggles between Black men and white men for power over Black women both in the era of enslavement and the period contemporary to the film. The highly sexual nature of the possession of Abby's body speaks to the long, brutal, history of the gendered racism underlying white supremacy.

The film and exorcism suggest that the restoration of Black pride and power must come from Africa through the reclamation of pre-slavery cultural practices while also maintaining the respectability of Christianity. Bishop Williams' Yoruba/Christian exorcism suggests that an

acknowledgement of the past coupled with an embrace of the Black Christian Church of the present is necessary in the process of confronting the demon of transgenerational sexual trauma. This confrontation is, however, completely passive for Abby and is more accurately presented as a sexist healing ritual for the restoration of the authority of Black masculinity.

In *Abby*, Black male representatives of the church, police, and academia are all instrumental in directing the power of the Christian god and Ologun to restore Abby. As a film made post-Jim Crow but before policies of racist mass incarceration, *Abby* suggests that the power of the Black church and Africa-derived Black culture were not in question, but the authority of Black masculinity over Black women was revealed as the power in need of reinstating. By casting out the threat posed by the demon and returning Abby to their control, a historical crisis of masculinity is resolved.

While so much of Abby's possession is focused on sex and sexuality, her exorcism, significantly, does not take place in her bedroom, as it does for so many other possessed cinematic women. Instead, the rite is performed in the bar where she goes to pick up men. This space is notably urban, secular, dedicated to commercialized "vices," and removed from the privacy of the home. In these ways, the bar stands in contrast to Abby's familiar home and church environment. Abby's demon, rather than confining her to her bed, actually widens her geographic sphere of activity as her adventures take her further and further from the space of legitimate sexual activity in the context of good Christian womanhood and the marriage bed. As the demon says through her, "It is time for Abby to live!" The demon removes Abby from her limited domestic space and relationships, suggesting that she isn't fully alive within them. In this way, the demon resists conformity with patriarchal institutions controlling women. This fuller version of life is a threat to the continuation of home and church as, once outside of them, Abby

is not inclined to return. It is in the bar that Abby rejects her previous sex life for a new one until she is exorcised of her excessive sexuality by the men in her life.

Just as the church is a space of repressed sexuality, the bar is a space of expressed sexuality and Abby's movement from the church and rectory to the urban bar is a visible representation of her social transition away from respectability. As a site of sexuality, it is in the bar that the trinity of respectable Black men must restrain and subdue Abby. Until she is exorcised, she will not be removed from this immoral space. Abby is made to lie down on the filthy floor of a club, clad in a mini-dress and heels, unlike most possession victims who are tied to their beds. Abby is only able, or perhaps willing, to return to her marriage bed and church after her barroom exorcism.

While blaxploitation horror like the *Blacula* films and *Sugar Hill* present urban Black communities in a positive light, *Abby* presents a strong contrast between respectable and degenerate Black spaces by contrasting it with semi or suburban, church-centered community. When Emmett and Cass find Abby in the bar and try to make her leave, the other men there assault Emmett and block Cass, until Abby becomes violent. Nightclubs in *Sugar Hill* and *Blacula*, however, are spaces of Black fiscal success, sophistication, arts, and community. These more progressive films provide an example of the healthy integration of sexuality into public life, one which does not require alignment with white notions of respectability and femininity for its safety. The two Black communities in Abby, urban/degenerate and suburban/moral, are set-up in conflict, rather than coalition, weakening both against the hegemony of white supremacy-defined acceptability. As a conservative film, *Abby* presents a single, de-sexualized option for healthy Black community and the safety of Black bodies. While the demon possessing her declares the autonomy of their relationship when he has her say, "I don't need you anymore; I

have Abby!" this remove from the larger community is stopped by the bishop's exorcism. As the movie poster warns potential viewers, "Abby doesn't need a man anymore...the devil is her lover now!" and this separation from patriarchal control is the horror that will be revealed in the theater.

Abby is a film that, for both its uniqueness and complexity, merits greater study than it has previously received. While nearly forgotten because of the threat of lawsuit for copyright violation, it was tremendously successful upon its release and presents a rich document of the historical period it was produced in. The positive depiction of African religions, fear of Black female sexuality and use of controlling stereotypes, and the restoration of patriarchal power mark the film as both unique and in alignment with other films in the subgenre. Demonic possession films continue to be popular and *Abby* needs consideration as part of their history.

Abby presents a very different possession film than those examined in previous chapters as it uniquely depicts a Black woman as possessed and in need of salvation via a syncretic, familiar exorcism. Though different in this way, it still depicts women's struggle for bodily autonomy under patriarchy. As a blaxploitation imitation of *The Exorcist,* reading the film is useful to consider how it differs from its predecessor in its depictions of Blackness versus whiteness, but also why it remains is so unique within the genre. A fable for the legitimacy of Black patriarchal power, *Abby* is, like the nun films of chapter three, a conservative film in terms of gender ideology. However, later films of Black bodies possessed by forces other than demons, like *Get Out* (2017) and *Skeleton Key* (2007), are examples of the disruptive potential of horror films to call out racism as horrific, without the misogyny that underlies *Abby.* As hooks famously wrote, "To be oppressed means to be deprived of your ability to choose" (*Feminist theory*) and

the fictional narrative of a body possessed by another is a potentially useful fable for exploring and resisting systems of oppression.

Conclusion

By analyzing a number of demonic possession horror films from 1922 to 2018, this dissertation has demonstrated the utility of a feminist, interdisciplinary reading that takes into account the intersection of multiple controlling cultural institutions. Over this period of time, the specific anxieties about women's roles and bodies that appear in these horror films mutate, with an emphasis in 2007 to 2015 that reflects a surge in pronatalist ideology. This study suggests that possession horror film specifically expresses fears related to the loss of control over the bodies of women. While possessed, the female characters deny their societies access to their labor. Essential to the operation of patriarchal capitalism, women's labor comes in multiple forms: paid and unpaid labor, reproductive labor, and the production of sexual pleasure. While some of the films analyzed here can be read as feminist fables advocating for the greater bodily autonomy of women-- by demonstrating the horror that results from a lack of agency-- others seem merely to reproduce current anti-choice, anti-woman rhetoric. However, whether the films challenge dominant power structures or not, each illuminates the interwoven systems of oppression which control women's bodily agency. As the analysis of the films show, public health and religion appear as the sites charged with regulating and re-appropriating possessed, out-of-control, women.

Summary of Research

Read through the precepts of preconception ideology from the field of public health, the *Paranormal Activity* film franchise may be understood as a fable of how extreme reproductive surveillance, reaching deep into women's bodies long before conception, is horrifying and

destructive for women and men alike. Lacking both agency and value as individuals, women and girls are sacrificed for the project of preparing for possible future pregnancies. In this way, they are possessed by the phantom fetus, and are subject to disciplining to maintain their value as vessels for future white citizens. The films' use of the found-footage narrative style serves to emphasize the horror of surveillance, making the viewer complicit in both the destructive policing of women and the strengthening of the demon, as it feeds on fear and attention. Like the demon in the film series, the phantom fetus threatens to dominate women's bodies and discursively reduce them to less than human vessels, invisible machines for the production of falsely independent fetuses.

The emphasis on pregnancy in this reading of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise raises the question, why are there so many possessed nuns in exorcism films? Because nuns take vows of celibacy, they are, in theory, never going to be pregnant. Nuns thus lack the reproductive value of lay women who are needed to reproduce the capitalist labor force. The examination of films and the legacy of the gothic bleeding nun in chapter three, as well as the recent disclosures by nuns and Vatican of long-standing sexual abuse and exploitation, suggest that the body of the nun has value as a producer of both labor and sexual pleasure for the Catholic Church. The nun, impoverished, isolated from family, and controlled by a strict male hierarchy, is a vulnerable being and her frequent appearance in fiction as bleeding and/or possessed reveals anxieties surrounding her person. The global system of church missions, hospitals, and schools would be impossible to maintain without her unpaid labor. The threat of losing nuns' vital labor to an increasingly secular world presents a logistical and cultural nightmare for the Catholic Church and its millions of adherents. Though she is idealized as representing Marian purity, the nun has long been abused by supposedly celibate clergy who have absolute control over her labor, body,

and spiritual well-being. Also a staple of pornography and criticism by non-Catholic Christianity, the nun, vilified as a sexual or asexual deviant, is a figure ripe for possession narratives. In possession films, her defloration, menstruation, pregnancies, and abortions are made visible on her bloody habit. For women outside of religious orders and Catholicism, the abject body of the nun, rather than being especially pure and protected, functions as a trope evoking all women as terrifying.

Despite the increasing diversity of the Catholic Church, all of the films discussed in chapters two and three feature white females as possession victims, constructing Whiteness as valuable in reproductive futurity and monolithic in the European past. Indeed, the demonically possessed female in film is white in every instance, with the exception of *Abby* (1974). Chapter four presents a close reading of this single film about a demonically possessed Black woman. Analyzing this film in the contexts of the development of Black women in horror, the blaxploitation-horror subgenre, and Black and African American religious life in U.S. in the twentieth century, reveals a pattern similar to that outlined in Chapters two and three. However, because Black women's exploitation differs from that of white women, *Abby* offers a variation on the possessed woman film by highlighting African religious beliefs and the specific context of the Black Christian Church. The film evokes the controlling stereotypes identified by Hill Collins, especially that of the Jezebel, that continue to discipline Black women. *Abby* locates acceptable Black womanhood securely in the guise of the "good Christian woman," a respectable, desexualized, submissive, and productive being subject to the control of Black men, while being protected from the predations of white men. Answer the research question of *why did* Abby *appear when the possessed women are always white and how is the film different from others like it?* As a blaxploitation imitation of *The Exorcist* (1972), *Abby* was produced to

capitalize on the earlier film's success but key aspects of the film were changed to contextualization to contemporary Black religious life and representations of Black, versus white, womanhood.

These chapters explore different sets of films, analyze specific themes and contexts, and explaining why and how each came into existence. Chapter two examines the *Paranormal Activity* franchise's use of surveillance of the prepregnant body through the lens of pronatalism and preconception ideology. The possessed and bleeding nuns of chapter three arose from the British gothic literary tradition and reveal anxieties about the sexual and productive hidden body of Catholic nuns. Chapter four considers *Abby* and the fear of Black women's sexuality, including the continued use of controlling stereotypes that both exploit and repress that sexuality. But while the specific tropes of each type of possessed woman film differ, the underlying message contradicts the more optimistic analysis reached by Olson and Reinhard, that the possessed female should be seen as rebellious Others. In contrast to these critics' celebration of moments of rebellion in possession films, my research reveals that there is much to cause concern. Not only are the possessed victims either dead or returned to passive inertness at the end of the film, their sufferings are justified by the exorcists.

In my reading, the possessed females are tormented by the conflicting demands of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism and anxieties over fear of a loss of control and access. The productive, reproductive, and sexual labor of women is required to perpetuate the ideological and economic system; meanwhile, the possessed body, abject and sexual, must be tamed to reproduce both this system and the labor force. Violent, non-consensual, and destructive, possession is not rebellion any more than rape could be considered sexual liberation. As Foucault has observed, the body of the possessed is a theatrical stage (*Abnormal* 211), one on which multiple power

structures compete for political and discursive control over the body. The woman herself doesn't appear as an active agent in these struggles; she is only a productive/reproductive machine awaiting ordering and direction.

Like earlier Freudian feminist studies of horror films, critical readings which view the spectacle of the tortured body of a woman as liberatory continue the abjectification of the monstrous feminine. Instead, a more productive analysis reads the systems of oppression, rather than the female characters, as horrific. Understanding the filmic violence as the result of oppressive systems shifts the identification of the antagonist from the possessed woman to the force that limits her power and autonomy. Seeing women as fully human beings whose bodily agency is threatened by both patriarchal demons and those who would de-possess her body to re-possess it for their own use makes these films feminist fables. This is more nuanced and more engaged with the complex and intersecting powers of real-world oppression than reading the films as narratives of monstrous rebels who are successfully suppressed. The utility of this approach has potential application to a larger group of possession films than those discussed in this dissertation.

Future Directions

My research demonstrates the need for further study of possession films, including those produced in other media and those focused on different themes than the ones considered here. There are several possible areas of future research that could develop from this dissertation, including expanding the sample of media analyzed, as well as a consideration of non-demonic possession cinema, especially of Black characters. There are literally hundreds of films and books focusing on possession and exorcism and far more of them deserve criticism.

Other possession films approach the narrative in ways less reminiscent of *The Exorcist,* but still legible as tales of the violent disciplining of women under patriarchal ideology. This includes films where a woman is possessed by the fetus she is carrying, such as *Beyond the Door* (1974), *Delivery: the beast within* (2013) and *Devil's Due* (2014). Two popular possession film franchises from India[24] certainly deserve critical attention and consideration of the themes of gender, sexuality, and religion. Additionally, the *1920* series engages with post-colonial identity struggles, suggesting the theme of a previously "possessed" country after "exorcism."

Other popular U.S. films related to those discussed in this dissertation also merit future research. While *The Nun* from *The Conjuring* universe was considered in-depth in chapter three, other films from the franchise certainly merit attention, especially *The Conjuring 2* (2016) and *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), which both focus on possessed girls. Additionally, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021) is interesting for the use of voluntary and directed possession across genders, as well continuing the series' theme of triumphant heteronormativity. Significant films for this project that have not yet been released are *Agnes* (12/10/2021), about possessed nuns, and three announced sequels to *The Exorcist,* with the first planned for a 2023 release date.

While the threat of a loss of access to and control over white women's bodies is often expressed in demonic possession/religious exorcism films, other subgenres of possession horror have been utilized for exploring more subversive and even radical dialogues about the freedom and agency of Black bodies in the U.S. Alternative versions of the possession narrative allow for potential feminist use like that discussed in relation to the *Paranormal Activity* films earlier in this dissertation. Voodou possession, in films like *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973) and *Skeleton Key* (2005), is voluntary and empowering for the possessed, and Jordan Peele's films approach the horror of a loss of bodily agency in entirely new ways. While Voodou as a source of

liberation in horror film has been explored by Kameelah Martin, the inclusion of Peele's films, and a consideration of these types of possession versus Abby's demonic possession is a possible avenue for future scholarship on race and resistance in horror films. Peele's acclaimed films *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) explore a human, rather than demonic, agent gaining possession over the body of another living person. Rather than being possessed by supernatural demons in a religious morality story, Peele's films consider the effects of race and class on bodily agency through contests for control over bodies by human agents. While the conflict in possession/exorcism films is neatly resolved by the triumph of divine power directed by a powerful ecclesiastic patriarch, the narratives of one human possessing another have more complicated and more radical resolutions, reflecting the need to challenge fundamental systemic inequalities to dismantle capitalist white supremacy. Future study of these possession films would begin to address the gap in scholarship on race and possession in horror cinema.

In addition to films, streaming television shows that adapt and draw inspiration from the story of *The Exorcist* should be analyzed for how the themes discussed in this dissertation may be present and if there are indications of shifts in the genre. The *American Horror Story* (2011-) television show has featured several possessions, including of a nun. Additionally, *The Exorcist* (2016-2017) television show could be considered, particularly for its changed depiction of the church, and unchanged critique of mothers with demanding careers as a danger to daughters within the nuclear family.

Several phone applications demonstrate the transmedia presence of the possession horror subgenre. One app is a reference guide for Catholic prayers for exorcism, allowing a user to assume the power of the exorcist in real-life supposed possessions. Other apps include games based on solving puzzles to escape from demons or to exorcise your parishioners, allowing the

player to experience the genre as either potential victim or savior. Consideration of these different approaches to the genre would be useful for adaptation studies.

Final Conclusions

As these potential directions for future research indicate, my approach to reading possession films has the potential to produce readings of popular culture artifacts with critical utility. Divorced from problematic Freudian psychology and notions of the fecund female body as inherently monstrous, this methodology is more sensitive to the many vectors of discipline and power which control women's bodies. Rather than further denigrating the vulnerable reproductive body of women, as do theories of abjection and the monstrous female, this approach recognizes and connects the violence done to real-world women to the harmful ideologies produced and reproduced, and sometimes even challenged, in horror films. The critical lens employed in this dissertation attempts to illuminate the ideologies underlying not just the films under discussion but also the relevant and related discourse in the areas of public health, religion, and economic and legislative equity and justice.

Concluding this work, begun in 2018, at the end of 2021 demands a moment of consideration for the most recent legislative assaults on women's bodily autonomy. Texas recently banned abortions after six weeks, earlier than women often know they are pregnant, and enacted a procedure for private citizens to be rewarded for reporting non-compliance: "Family, friends, lawyers, members of the clergy, abortion providers and fundraisers could all be implicated in potential lawsuits for helping someone in Texas get an abortion" (Rummler). This is, of course, only one of many strict anti-abortion laws that has passed across the country in the last three years. The Texas law is noteworthy for its program of rewarding the citizen

surveillance of women, however. And while it is noteworthy, it is still not novel. Laws passed in 16th century France are notably similar, encouraging neighbors, midwives, clergy, and doctors to surveil pregnant women and those who recently gave birth and to report any suspicious loss of fetuses or infants *(Caliban* 88*).* Both the value placed on independently non-viable embryos and forced pregnancies in Texas are only the most recent instances of pro-natalist, anti-woman legislation which may well result in Roe v Wade being overturned soon and an end to safe, legal abortions across the country.

Disheartening though the parallel to early modern Europe is, it does demonstrate the need and value of continued study into the products of popular discourse and critique of the unjust ideologies embedded within them. Discourse which demeans and devalues women and girls, be it found in public health policy, law, or horror films, should be denounced and challenged in order to reshape the narrative to one more just and woman-affirming. It is possible that horror films, and possession films in particular with their concern with bodily agency, may be used as feminist fables to demonstrate that there is truly nothing more terrifying than living in a culture that is both dangerous and deeply unjust and in which even your body is not your own.

Filmography

[REC]2 (2009) dir. Jaume Balaguero, Spain

1920 (2008) dir. Vikram Bhatt, India

1920: Evil Returns (2012) dir. Bhushan Patel, India

1920 London (2016) dir. Dharmendra Suresh Desai, India

1921 (2018) dir. Vikram Bhatt, India

Abby (1972) dir. William Girdler, U.S.

Alucarda (1977) dir. Juan Lopez Moctezuma, Mexico

Annabel Comes Home (2019) dir. Gary Dauberman, U.S.

Anneliese: The Exorcist Tapes (2011) dir. Jude Gerard Prest, U.S.

Apartment 143 (2011) dir. Carles Torrens, Spain

Atlantics (2019) dir. Mati Diop, Senegal

The Atticus Institute (2015) dir. Chris Sparling, U.S.

The Autopsy of Jane Doe (2016) dir. André Øvredal, U.K.

Ava's Possessions (2014) dir. Jordan Galland, U.S.

Beyond the Door (1974) dir. Ovidio G. Assonitis and Roberto D'Ettorre Piazzoli, Italy

Bhoot (2003) dir. Ram Gopal Varma, India

Black Caesar (1973) dir. Larry Cohen, U.S.

Black Moon (1934) dir. Roy William Neill, U.S.

The Blackcoat's Daughter (2015) dir. Oz Perkins, Canada

Blacula (1972) dir. William Crane, U.S.

Blessed (2004) dir. Simon Fellows, U.S.

The Borderlands (2013) dir. Elliot Goldner, U.K.

The Brood (1979) dir. David Cronenberg, Canada

Chloe, Love is Calling You (1935) dir. Marshall Neilan, U.S.

Coffy (1973) dir. Jack Hill, U.S.

The Conjuring (2013) dir. James Wan, U.S.

The Conjuring 2 (2016) dir. James Wan, U.S.

The Conjuring the Devil Made Me Do It (2021) dir. Michael Chaves, U.S.

Constantine (2005) dir. Francis Lawrence, U.S.

The Crucifixion (2017) dir. Xavier Gens, Romania

Deliver us from Evil (2014) dir. Scott Derrickson, U.S.

Delivery: The Beast Within (2014) dir. Brian Netto, U.S.

Demon Baby (2014) dir. Coz Greenop, U.K.

Demon Seed (1977) dir. Donald Cammell, U.S.

The Devil Inside (2012) dir. William Brent Bell, U.S.

Devil's Doorway (2018) dir. Aislinn Clarke, Ireland

Devil's Due (2014) dir. Matt Bettinelli and OlpinTyler Gillett, U.S.

The Devils (1971) dir. Ken Russell, U.S.

Drums o'Voodoo (1934) dir. Arthur Hoerl, U.S.

Evil Dead (1981) dir. Sam Raimi, U.S.

Evil Dead II (1987) dir. Sam Raimi, U.S.

Exeter (2015) dir. Marcus Nispel, U.S.

The Exorcism of Molly Hartley (2015) dir. Steven R. Monroe, Canada

Foxy Brown (1974) dir. Jack Hill, U.S.

Get Out (2017) dir. Jordan Peele, U.S.

Ginger Snaps (2000) dir. John Fawcett, Canada

Gothika (2003) dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, U.S.

Grace (2009) dir. Paul Solet, U.S.

A Haunted House (2013) dir. Michael Tiddes, U.S.

Häxan (1922) dir. Benjamin Christensen, Denmark

Hell Baby (2013) dir. Robert Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon, U.S.

Hereditary (2018) dir. Ari Aster

The Horror of Party Beach (1964) dir. Del Tenney, U.S.

The House of the Devil (2009) dir. Ti West, U.S.

How to Make a Monster (1958) dir. Herbert L. Strock, U.S.

Incarnate (2016) dir. Brad Peyton, U.S.

Inheritance (2011) dir. Robert O'Hara, U.S.

Inner Demons (2014) dir. Seth Grossman, U.S.

It's Alive (1974) dir. Larry Cohen, U.S.

Jennifer's Body (2009) dir. Karyn Kusama, U.S.

The Last Exorcism (2010) dir. Daniel Stamm, U.S.

The Last Exorcism Part II (2013) dir. Ed Gass-Donnelly, U.S.

The Leech Woman (1960) dir. Edward Dein, U.S.

The Mansion of Madness (1973) dir. Juan Lopez Moctezuma, Mexico

Matka Joanna od Aniołów (1961) dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Poland

The Nun (2018) dir. Corin Hardy, U.S.

The Omen (1976) dir. Richard Donner, U.S.

Ouija: The Origin of Evil (2016) dir. Mike Flannagan, U.S.

Paranormal Activity (2007) dir. Oren Peli, U.S.

Paranormal Activity 2 (2010) dir. Tod Williams, U.S.

Paranormal Activity 3 (2011) dir. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, U.S.

Paranormal Activity 4 (2012) dir. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, U.S.

Paranormal Activity: the Marked Ones (2014) dir. Christopher Landon, U.S.

Paranormal Activity: the Ghost Dimension (2015) dir. Gregory Plotkin, U.S.

Phoonk (2008) dir. Ram Gopal Varma, India

Phoonk 2 (2010) dir. Milind Gadagkar, India

The Possession (2021) dir. Ole Bornedal, U.S.

The Possession of Hannah Grace (2018) dir. Diederik Van Rooijen, U.S.

The Possession of Michael King (2014) dir. David Young, U.S.

Queen of the Damned (2002) dir. Michael Rymer, U.S.

The Rite (2011) dir. Mikael Håfström, U.S.

Rosemary's Baby (1968) dir. Roman Polanski, U.S.

Scream Blacula Scream (1973) dir. Bob Kelljan, U.S.

The Secret of Emily Blair (2016) dir. Joseph P. Genier, U.S.

Skeleton Key (2006) dir. Iain Softley, U.S.

Son of Dracula (1943) dir. Robert Siodmak, U.S.

Sugar Hill (1974) dir. Paul Maslansky, U.S.

The Taking of Deborah Logan (2014) dir. Adam Robitel, U.S.

Teeth (2007) dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein, U.S.

The Unborn (1991) dir. David S. Goyer, U.S.

The Unholy (2021) dir. Evan Spiliotopoulos, U.S.

Us (2019) dir. Jordan Peele, U.S.

The Vatican Tapes (2015) dir. Mark Neveldine, U.S.

V/H/S (2012) dir. Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, et al., U.S.

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End Notes

[1] Image source: Rich, Jamie S. "The King of Kings - #266." *Criterion Confessions,* 25 Dec. 2007, http://www.criterionconfessions.com/2007/12/king-of-kings-266.html

[2] Exceptions to this are the character of Nell in *The Last Exorcism Part II* (2013), Needy *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and, to an extent, Kat in *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (2015).

[3] *My Best Friend's Exorcism* (2016; adapted for a soon to be released film), *Headful of Ghosts* (2015), *Come Closer* (2003), the *Merciless* series (2014-2018), the *The Demon Catchers of Milan* series (2012-2014), and *The Good Demon* (2018).

[4] *The Last Exorcism Part II* (2013), *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011), *Paranormal Activity 4* (2012), *Paranormal Activity: the Marked Ones* (2014), *Paranormal Activity: the Ghost Dimension* (2015), *V/H/S* (2012), *Vatican Tapes* (2015), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), *The Rite* (2011), *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (2018), *The Nun* (2018), *The Conjuring* (2013), *The Conjuring 2* (2016), *The Conjuring the Devil Made Me Do It* (2021), *The Crucifixion* (2017), *Blackcoat's Daughter* (2015), *Annabel Comes Home* (2019), *Anneliese: The Exorcist Tapes* (2011), *The Unholy* (2021), *The Possession* (2021), *Incarnate* (2016), *Hell Baby* (2013), *A Haunted House* (2013), *Exeter* (2015), *The Devil Inside* (2012), *Deliver us from Evil* (2014), *Devil's Due* (2014), *Ava's Possessions* (2014), *The Exorcism of Molly Hartley* (2015), *The Secret of Emily Blair* (2016)

[5] Friedkin "opted to excise the spider walk from the theatrical cut due to three main factors. He felt the scene was too big a special effect so early in the story, that it undercut the impact of Chris MacNeil having just learned of Burke Dennings' death, and that the wires used to make the stunt work were too noticeable and hurt the effect" (Kennedy).

[6] Jackson, Krzywinska, Hendershot and Scott all consider the emergence and uniqueness of possessed males, who are usually entered via technology and are possessed by ghosts rather than demons. In a study of Italian and French *Exorcist* knockoffs, Olney argues that European possession films "queer the whole idea of possession" and "openly celebrate transgressive femininity by making both the possessed and the possessor women, and by refiguring possession as a transmission of female excess that representatives of religious or patriarchal authority are, more often than not, powerless to prevent" (561). The European adaptations are potentially liberatory tales of women, in a sense, empowering each other to defeat the patriarchy.

[7] Image source: Scott, Ryan. "Paranormal Activity 7 Scares up Spring 2021 Release Date." *Movieweb,* 7 Nov. 2019, https://movieweb.com/paranormal-activity-7-release-date/

[8] *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Beyond the Door* (1974), *It's Alive* (1974), *Demon Seed* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *The Unborn* (1991), *Blessed* (2004), *Grace* (2009), *The House of the Devil* (2009), *Devil's Due* (2014), *Demon Baby* (2014), *Delivery: The Beast Within* (2014)

[9] *[REC]2* (2009), *The Last Exorcism* (2010), *Anneliese: The Exorcist Tapes* (2011), *Apartment 143* (2011), *The Devil Inside* (2012), *The Borderlands* (2013), *Devil's Due* (2014), *The Taking of*

Deborah Logan (2014), *The Possession of Michael King* (2014), *Inner Demons* (2014), *The Atticus Institute* (2015), *The Vatican Tapes* (2015), *Devil's Doorway* (2018)

[10] The Midwives' plot to produce male heirs to bring a demon into the physical world may be compared to the cult conspiracy in Ari Aster's critically and commercially successful horror film, *Hereditary* (2018). It is revealed at the end of *Hereditary* that maternal grandmother, Ellen, and her cult prepared her granddaughter, Charlie, as a demonic host but after Charlie's death, her grandson, Peter, is instead possessed. Charlie and Peter's parents are both supernatural killed just prior to the possession, their usefulness in raising the children now complete. A cult member explains, as the demon Paimon possesses Peter, that planning to use Charley was a mistake and that Paimon prefers a male host. *Hereditary's* cult has a more straightforward plot, unlike the *Paranormal Activity* films, as it is encapsulated in one film and is not attempting to pull together disparate elements from five previous films. However, both stories include maternal grandmothers being responsible for the deaths of their daughters, destruction of their grandchildren as agentic beings, and dedicated to the service of evil, patriarchal cults. The destruction of a future generation to satisfy the greed of an older one could certainly be interpreted as a condemnation of environmentally-destructive late capitalism.

[11] Image source: Boylan, Andrew M. "Vamp or Not? Alucarda." *Taliesin Meets the Vampires,* 30 July 2007, http://taliesinttlg.blogspot.com/2007/07/vamp-or-not-alucarda.html

[12] Image source: Wilson, Matt. "Whatever you do, don't stop praying (The Nun 2018)." *Warning! Spoilers Coming,* 5 Feb. 2019, http://warningspoilersarecoming.blogspot.com/2019/02/whatever-you-do-dont-stop-praying-nun.html

[13] The prevalence of the bleeding nun in gothic fiction is much larger than this short list implies, and other examples exist, though discussion of them is outside the scope of this project. Mulvey-Roberts notes that *The Monk* inspired numerous imitations featuring bleeding nuns, including: *Almagro and Claude; or, Monastic Murder; Exemplified in the Dreadful Doom of an Unfortunate Nun* by an anonymous author (1810), *Juliette* by the Marquis de Sade (1796), *Priory of St. Clair; or, Spectre of the Murdered Nun* by Sarah Wilkinson (1811), *The Nun of Misericordia* by Sophia L. Frances (1807) and the anonymously written 'The Bleeding Nun of St Catherine's' (1801).

[14] Corpses have been demonically possessed in horror films before, for example in *Evil Dead* (1981) and Evil Dead II (1987), but examples are rare until *The Nun* and two recent films: *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (2018) and *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), both of which focus on the possessed bodies of young women in the morgue.

[15] Priests in both *The Rite* (2011) and *Ouija: The Origin of Evil* (2016) are possessed for portions of the films. However, both priests actively fight their possessing demons and aid others in their own exorcisms. I have not yet found an example of a possessed fictional nun maintaining such agency during possession.

[16] Image source: Hanson, Peter. "Abby (1974)." *Every '70s Movie.* 9 Aug. 2014, https://every70smovie.blogspot.com/2014/08/abby-1974.html

[17] There are a few films in which Black women are possessed by human ghosts seeking revenge (*Gothika* (2003), *Inheritance* (2011), and *Atlantics* (2019)) and the first exorcism performed by the titular character in *Constantine* (2005) is done to save a demon-possessed Filipino girl. The original vampire and Egyptian queen Akasha's vampiric powers are a result of the demonic spirit that lives within her in *Queen of the Damned* (2002).

[18] Before the 1970s, Black women were virtually absent from horror films (and films in general). Those women that did appear were typically in secondary or tertiary roles as Voodoo practitioners (*Drums o'Voodoo* (1934), *Black Moon* (1934), *Chloe, Love is Calling You* (1935), etc.), as the 'magical negro' (*The Leech Woman* (1960)), or maid (*Son of Dracula* (1943), *How to Make a Monster* (1958), *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964)). Most of these appearances are brief, stereotypical, and flat. In each of these roles, the character acts as a servant to mostly or exclusively white others, providing them with assistance, either supernatural (voodoo priestess and 'magical negro') or mundane (maid). The common focus on the experiences of heteronormative white men in horror texts, and neglect of these secondary and tertiary characters "actively excludes the black woman, for she is the non-Other, the Other of the white male's Others (black men and white women)" (Brooks 463). The Black woman is simply too Other to be either the central protagonist or antagonist but is relegated to only aiding one side or the other. Despite her position on the margins of the narrative, these women do have domains of power and spaces where they are the recognized authority, requiring white main characters to come to them for crucial assistance.

[19] Originally titled "The Blacorcist" (Lawrence 60), *Abby* capitalizes on the success of *The Exorcist* and Warner Bros. threatened to sue for copyright violation. As a result, the film was pulled from theaters (Smith 9).

[20] Source of images: Rodriguez, Fernando. "Abby (1974)." *The Jamaa Fanaka Experience,* 31 Jan. 2014, http://thefanakaexperience.blogspot.com/2014/01/abby-1974.html

[21] Two blaxploitation horror films released by AIP just before *Abby* provide alternate examples of stereotypes of Black women which, though problematic, are more agentic than Abby. In *Scream Blacula Scream,* Voodoo queen Lisa Fortier, played by Grier, is the only one with the power to either save or kill Blacula, and thus the only one able to save her community from the death and evil transformation he threatens. Marki Bey, starring as the titular character in *Sugar Hill*, is a successful photographer who turns to a Voodoo queen for help in taking revenge on a white crime boss for murdering her successful nightclub-owning boyfriend and exploiting the Black community. While neither Lisa or Sugar are feminist characters, they are in control of their bodies and their lives and actively work to make their communities safer. Abby, on the other hand, lacks control over her body and presents only disruption to her church community. All three characters are problematic in their depictions, however, as dangerously hyper-sexual (Brooks 27) and also threateningly (to the men around them) strong. Brooks notes that characters like Abby and Sugar Hill are depicted as "the stereotype of the black Superwoman, a characterization that is dehumanizing and makes the women monstrous ("Importance of

Neglected Intersections" 467). The controlling stereotypes of the Jezebel and the strong matriarch meet in blaxploitation, both depicting Black women as "too much."

[22] Spirit possession is regularly included in lists of Africanism present in U.S. Black Christianity and is especially important in Spiritual Churches (Baer; Jacobs and Kaslow; Perez) while possession by the Holy Spirit/Ghost is an element of some Baptist, Pentacostal, and Holiness churches (Hobbs). Possession by spirits is a central aspect of Voodou, a religion with origins in Catholicism and Yoruba Vodun. While outside the scope of this dissertation, an examination of these different forms of possession in horror film and their liberatory or radical potential is recommended for future study.

[23] Noticeably absent in the film is the presence of Islam in the bishop's or other characters' religious practices, an omission which, with consideration to historical context, places the film in line with more conservative Black religious ideology. While the religion of Chrislam, originating in Yorubaland and blending elements of Christianity and Islam, officially began two years after *Abby's* release (Jansen 653), the syncretic practices which proceeded it were recorded as far back as at least the 1950s and included Yoruba religious practices in the assemblage (Williams 6). Islam was, of course, also important in pan-African movements in the U.S. At least 10% of enslaved Africans brought to the U.S. were from Islamic backgrounds (Keyes) and an interest in the religion was part of the movement to decolonize Black culture. Of course, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the most well-known sect of Black Islam was the Nation of Islam, which espouses a belief in white inferiority and supports Black nationalism. While by no means all Black Muslims in the U.S. were members of the Nation of Islam or supported their beliefs, differentiation between the two identities were blurred in the popular imagination, as well as government surveillance and control. The FBI had been caricaturing African American Islam as dangerous since the 1930s and controlling propaganda, threats, intimidation, mass incarceration, illegal surveillance, and assassination have continued to the present (Johnson 383ff). Despite the rising popularity and importance of Islam in African American, especially in urban communities, culture during the blaxploitation era, Islam is not depicted in *Abby* and other films of the genre. Had it been, these films may have been much more subversive. However, this may well have come at the cost of decreased interest from both Black and white audiences, and, as an exploitation film, appeal to a wide audience and their ticket-money was more important to the filmmakers than presenting a radical critique of Eurocentrism in the African American Christian community.

[24] *Bhoot* (2003), *Phoonk* (2008), *1920* (2008), *Phoonk 2* (2010), *1920: Evil Returns* (2012), *1920 London* (2016), *1921* (2018)