

Political Polarization and Demonic Possession: How American Culture is Haunted by its Own Fascination with Good and Evil

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American culture, framed in its most widely understood definition, is a culmination of the traditions, ideals, and behaviors of the people who live there. Naturally, the movies which are produced there are direct representations of the current social and political environments. This paper analyzes how political polarization presents itself within film representations of demonic possession through natural opposites such as good and evil, traditionalism and modernism, and conventional and unconventional definitions of femininity. Works analyzed within include *Annabelle: Creation*, *The Conjuring*, *The Evil Dead*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, and *The Exorcist*. The infiltration of political polarization into a typically unpolitical genre such as horror suggests that it not only culturally haunts the politics of America, but every other facet of American life.

American culture, framed in its most widely understood definition, is a culmination of the traditions, ideals, and behaviors of the people who live here. Those who consume pop culture with an intuitive eye understand that media directly reflects the political climate in America, including even those which claim no intended bias. One specific aspect of American politics that significantly impacts American culture and the media it produces is the concept of political polarization, or the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes. In fact, political polarization haunts pop culture, as its consequential ideas and concepts infest and control the framework of what becomes popular, going beyond being simply influential in it. For example, as a result of political polarization, countless decisions about what and how concepts are presented in pop culture must be immensely considerate of how audiences

will perceive them as a result of their conservative or liberal alignment, especially when it comes to what will be promoted and displayed in movie theatres across the country. Interestingly, the impact these ideological extremes hold on American culture resulting from political polarization extends its haunting influence into the horror genre, specifically in the form of depictions of demonic possession.

Historically, the polarization of politics means that the separation of two main parties becomes more concrete over time as the ideals held by both cement within the two sides, creating two naturally opposing teams. Research collected about the polarization of politics, as well as the ways in which pop culture reflects this polarization within the horror genre, suggest that the fascination with demonic possession held by Americans stems from the growing separation of core ideologies. The resulting reflection of political polarization in media depicting demonic possession functions as a cultural haunting. The ways in which the film industry depicts certain situations in the horror genre during specific periods of American political history, however, in fact highlights how America culture perceives its own political atmosphere.

The concept of a cultural haunting in America as a result of this phenomenon is especially evident due to the fact that everyday interactions between American citizens are steadily more affected as polarization increases, and more movies depicting demonic possession and introducing politically polarized metaphors are created and consumed. Many studies on political polarization have proven that Americans no longer view politics as a large intermixing ideas and beliefs, a shift which has become steadily more concrete since the 1970's (Abramowitz and Saunders 542). There have always been separated parties with contradictory plans for the betterment of America, but never before has the way that Americans think about their opposing parties been so directly oppositional. This ideological shift alters the way Americans create, share, and consume pop culture. As previously mentioned, however, political polarization does not appear exclusively in political themed dramas and contemporary storylines. As far as horror on the big screen, directly opposing groups find their representation in the everlasting oppositional archetype depicting the fight between good and evil through demonic possession.

The 1973 film *The Exorcist* was arguably one of the first widely viewed American-produced movies depicting the grotesque and terrifying battle between supernatural good and evil, and the reaction from the public showed their shock and awe. According to a *New York Times* article by Roy Meacham, reports of younger audience members being removed from theaters and taken to hospitals were made within hours of its release, and many people left early with assertions that the film caused them to gag and vomit. In fact, critiques of the film described it as "obscene" due

to its language, violence, and satanic content; a term which used specifically in the time frame of its release further explains the backlash it received (Meacham). The movie's catastrophic release and eventual switch from an R to an X rating, however, clearly did not curb the American fascination with demonic possession. As the political climate continued to separate and ideological beliefs became more decentralized, more movies depicting their own interpretations of demonic possession hit the box office. Films such as *The Evil Dead* (1983), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Conjuring* (2013), and *Annabelle: Creation* (2017) would arguably still fall under the category of "obscene" in the 70's, and yet such films are watched by millions of Americans over time. As a result of this increased depiction of demonic possessions, the themes which are presented in these movies—including the unyielding fight against a perceived evil, the contradicting motives of traditionalism and modernism within society, and the inversion of the traditional definition of femininity—create the metaphor of a possessed society. Political polarization haunts pop culture, even within genres that are not expected to be political. Consequently, repeated depictions of demonic possessions mimicking political themes further cement the American fascination with polarized ideologies.

The Good and The Evil in America

In order to consider the ways in which polarization is demonstrated through pop culture representations of demonic possession, we must define what is considered "good" and "evil" in each pop culture representation. Good, in the context of the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church on demonic possession, is the fight for freedom from Evil. Freedom in this context means possessing the ability to choose good or evil. Evil, conversely, is having the ability to choose—and using that ability to choose—to be controlled by a force which exists only to negate and degrade God, or from a more general understanding, whatever is a constant "good" in a given situation.

Good and evil, however, do not have to be considered through the lens of the church, though the inclusion of Catholic priests as main characters in movies such as *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* leads to this assumption. For the sake of considering depictions of possessions as metaphors for political polarization, however, it is more apt to consider good and evil from their philosophical definitions, which present them simply as natural opposites. Even in a movie like *The Exorcist*, "good" and "evil" are more accurately defined as two independent forces fighting for their own intentions. Both still directly oppose each other while remaining fully independent of the other force because neither one depends on the other's existence. In fact, philosopher Friedrich Schelling, who considered the definitions of good and evil as being completely independent

of religion and rather something more accurately aligned with the concepts of ethics and morality, argued that “evil is not simply a *privation boni* (omission or negation of the Good), but an independent power,” and furthermore asserted that evil “exists as a *conditio sine qua non* (unalterable presupposition) of human freedom” (Naegeli-Osjord 21).

Of course, this is not to say that those who visit the movie theatre to enjoy a scary movie about demonic possession consciously decide that their political party aligns with the all-knowing good and that those who disagree might as well be from Hell. “Good” and “evil” in a horror movie, however, can mimic the experience of a viewer living in a polarized culture since polarization creates a culture where ideologies present as opposites. Furthermore, “evil,” in this case those who align with ideologies opposite of the viewer’s, has its own independent reasons for its choices, hence the continuously ongoing battle that symbolizes the political opposition in a polarized society. What is enticing about the fight between good and evil in movies like *The Exorcist*, *The Evil Dead*, *The Conjuring*, etc., is that what an audience deems as “the good” always conquers what they decide is “evil.” In other words, metaphors for whatever represents the opposite view from their own in the films is always defeated by the time the credits roll.

The Turning Tide of Tradition

To accurately represent both sides simultaneously, these films need to contain certain aspects that align with both sides of the political sphere. Traditionalism and modernism as they are represented in movies such as *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, and *The Conjuring* are examples of the powers of metaphor in pop culture, as they stand in for the polarizing groups of conservative and liberal-aligned citizens. As Bodo Winter explains, “cultural representations may strengthen metaphors in the minds of the people who witness these representations, which helps to keep metaphors alive” and furthermore, “cultural representations may elaborate on existing metaphors, enriching them with specific examples” (164). The “hero priests” and performing exorcists in these movies, whether they align with liberalism or conservatism, or modernists or traditionalists, in the minds of viewers, serve as metaphors for the continually polarized opinions on these concepts, and viewing these pop culture representations further cements the sense of polarization in those who consume them.

In the case of *The Exorcist*, the conflict between traditionalist and modernistic ideals contradict each other throughout the movie, mimicking polarized American ideologies. In the film, two priests are enlisted to cure the possessed young Regan, who exhibits behaviors that are complete departures from her norm. Regan, formally a sweet and well-behaved daughter living

a well-provided life, now curses, threatens, fights, and even urinates on herself due to a self-proclaimed infestation of demons. Despite the title of the movie, her mother and other close family friends consult psychiatrists first, including Father Damien Karras, who, contrary to his own title, not only separated from his former training and Catholic beliefs, but approaches Regan's actions with the idea that they should hold an exorcism not to actually expel the demons, but in the hopes that playing along with her delusions will lead her to accept that she has been cured by the end of it. This ritual is handled with the utmost caution by bringing in the traditional priest Father Lankester Merrin, an experienced exorcist, who actually believes that Regan is possessed by the demons she claims inhabit her body. The film itself makes this possession hard to deny, especially when the words "help me" rise from within the girl and become etched on her stomach (1:31:40). Both priests, however—psychiatrist and exorcist—hold firm to their individual trainings in order to save the girl; traditionalist Father Merrin eventually dies from a stress-induced heart-attack before completing the exorcism, and modernist Father Karras dies in an act of self-sacrifice in which he demands the demon leave Regan and enter his own soul before jumping out the two-story window.

These representations are confusing yet apt, as it is natural for the audience to be unsure of who to "root for." Regan's actions, such as floating above her bed as if being carried by an invisible force (1:50:23), the words which appear on her abdomen (1:31:40), and the unbelievable transformation of her face from innocent child to milky-eyed mutation, lead the audience to understand that the traditionalist is correct in his understanding of Regan's possession. Yet, it is only through a suspension of disbelief that the viewers forget that, in any other situation, Regan's actions are more than likely a result of a psychological imbalance. Both priests are "heroes" in this movie, called in to fight the true evil, yet both cannot be simultaneously correct in their approach at conquering said evil. Ultimately, Father Merrin is revealed to be the "correct" hero, approaching the situation with seasoned understanding and little time to explain to the lesser informed Father Karras. It is Karras, however, who eventually prevails in saving Regan, and through the most untraditional and sacrilegious, methods of accepting evil into his soul and then choosing to commit suicide.

These contradictory characteristics represent the political climate at the time. In the years surrounding 1973, leadership and foreign policy become controversial topics between liberal and conservative-aligned citizens. Specifically, longstanding core values concerning nationalism and what it means to be a "good American" start to clash with modern political issues. Those who watched *The Exorcist* the year it was released would not have been surprised by the early scene which showed that the movie Regan's mother starred in depicted scenes of student protests

(14:02), reflecting similar, real-life early 1970s student protests—this time against war. At this time, public opinion turned resolutely against American participation in the Vietnam War, but those with friends and family still fighting overseas faced the burden of remaining proud of their sacrifice and harboring hate for both the war they fought in and those who stand in protest of said sacrifice. Father Merrin thus serves as a metaphor for these individuals clinging to the traditional idea of nationalism in America, while simultaneously being challenged by the character of Father Karras, whose unconventional methods and eventual victory in the war against evil in the end of *The Exorcist* seems to foreshadow the political directions of the country.

President Nixon haunted the minds of Americans at this time, causing an influx of distrust and paranoia among citizens concerning power positions in the presidential office. Nixon still remained in the office despite the Watergate Scandal, and mixed views as to whether he eventually should leave resulted in a ripple effect of the same distrust and paranoia in everyday interactions between American citizens. Both priests in *The Exorcist*, backed by the power of the Catholic Church, act as metaphors for the confusing reliability of leadership during the years of its release. The Catholic Church relies heavily on tradition, and the eventual failure of Father Merrin calls to mind the question prevalent in the minds of many Americans at the time of Nixon's presidency as to actual reliability of leadership, especially in the traditional definition of it, in the changing country.

As American politics continues to become more contradictory, the production and distribution of movies involves current representation of the country's polarization through depictions of traditionalist and modernist ideas. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, produced in 2005, brings the American court system into play as the same government declares a War on Terror, highlighting specific areas considered an "axis of evil." In the movie, young Emily Rose, previously heavily guarded by a faith-based upbringing and traditionalist family, enters college as a freshman and faces life away from her family's secluded farm for the first time. This exposure eventually leads to her possession by demons, and, as a result of an exorcism enacted by the family and performed by Father Richard Moore, she dies of exposure and malnutrition. Father Moore gets arrested and sent to court. He pleads not guilty and accepts the help of ambitious lawyer Erin Bruner under the assumption that his explanation of what happened during the exorcism proves he was in fact not the evil entity which caused her death but rather the person trying to prevent it.

What are deemed threats to American citizens during the making of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* become more concrete as the War on Terror creates a monolithic enemy. Typical in a polarized society, however, not all of its citizens support this approach. Critics of the War on Terror

at this time claim that it foments an ideology of fear and repression that creates more enemies than what already existed for the country previously and promotes more violence than morally supportable by the country. This critique goes against the government's position that their plan mitigates the acts of terror and strengthens security. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* mimics the disputation that the "axis of evil" poses a concrete threat to the country. By the end of the film, the perception that a demonic presence indeed controlled Emily Rose and that Father Moore simply could not both expel the evil from the family and save the life of the girl is as equally disputed as the War on Terror. Father Moore stays true to the claim that demons possessed Emily Rose, but he is left with a guilt-ridden conscience and the question of whether he needed assistance from a medical professional during the exorcism, rather than staying true to the traditional faith-only ritualistic practice. The disparity lies in whether the "evil" was a real as Father Moore deemed it to be, shadowing the doubts of American perception of what threatened them at the time.

A few years later, 2011 brought about the movie *The Conjuring*, as well as a new wave of distrust in politicians, the immoral use of money in politics, and the blatant income inequality with the protest to Occupy Wall Street. The movie's plot mimics the simmering anger in Americans at rampant economic inequality, and its release during the same year as the Occupation led it to become one of the most popular horror movies of the year due to its representation of the economic status of the average American family. The middle-class family in *The Conjuring* gets monetarily trapped in a house haunted by the demonic presence of a devil-worshipping witch who once lived on the property. Traditional systems of power fail both American viewers (resulting in the March on Wall Street) and the family in the film as the Catholic Church responds to the possession of the mother, Carolyn Perrin, too late, and an un-ordained paranormal investigator must perform the exorcism in order to save her from murdering her own children.

In *The Conjuring*, the traditional teaching that only an ordained minister of God can perform an exorcism is challenged when the lagging response from the Vatican, or the seat of power in the Catholic Church, forces Ed Warren to perform an exorcism himself for the first time. The Warrens eventually save Carolyn Perrin through this exorcism without the help from an ordained priest, suggesting that modern thinking and action outside the traditionalist Catholic Church, which firmly discourages un-ordained individuals from performing an exorcism, not only saved her from the demon, but also that the traditionalist approach would have been too slow to save her. Yet despite the fact that an unconventional decision saved Carolyn Perrin, Ed and Lorraine Warren remain steady in their beliefs and continual practices of the more traditional views of the Catholic Church throughout the length of the movie, and ultimately claim that an act of God

saved them all. Hence *The Conjuring* seems to please both sides of the political spectrum, modernists and traditionalists alike.

Waves of Feminism and Possession

The years between 1973 and the late 2010's continued to reflect the polarization brought by the second and third waves of feminism. Despite the fact that what people usually highlight about these waves is the success that feminism provides women with over time, it would not have been a fight if there were not polarized ideas concerning whether or not feminism improved society. During these waves, movies depicting demonic possession mirror what feminism fought to change about society, as well as those who considered said fight to actually degrade what it means to be a woman. Movies such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Evil Dead* (1983), and *Annabelle: Creation* (2017) highlight that what others consider "evil" inverts what is traditionally "feminine" as well as anything which tries to take the control a woman has over her own body away.

In the case of *The Exorcist*, the specific attentions put on Regan's bodily functions and movements, as well as the fact that Regan is a young innocent girl, portray second-wave feminism in specifically obscene and polarizing ways. Arguably the most memorable scene from the movie is when the demon possessing Regan forces her to masturbate with a crucifix as a way of taunting her mother (1:18:34-1:19:34). The bloody, violent, and shocking scene shocked theater audiences. What made viewers so deterred, however, can be hard to pinpoint as the emphasis on polarization lies more in why the audience reacts so adversely to the scene rather than what the scene tries to convey.

The polarization shown through the famous crucifix scene depends on where "evil" lies within the scene for the viewer beyond the obvious demonic presence. Does "evil" reside in the notion that Regan's masturbation and foul language directly opposed the designated proper topics concerning the female body, or in the fact that a natural part of the female body is being used against the young girl's will? Feminism at the time of *The Exorcist's* theatrical release was focused on what it meant for a woman to have control over her own body. During the "second wave," feminist supporters worked to outlaw marital rape, built shelters for survivors of domestic violence and rape, and worked to raise awareness of—and put policies into place to stop—sexual harassment in the workplace. This wave also fought to eradicate widespread use of the term "girl" and replaced it with "woman," emphasizing the power of terminology and labeling in situations concerning unequal treatment of the sexes. Feminism between the 1960s and the 1980s focused on these issues because the main concern for eradicating inequality between the sexes lay within

the ways in which femininity, including but not limited to the physicality of the female body, can be taken away, withheld, and controlled. The attention focused on Regan's body, as in the crucifix scene, the writhing motions during the possession, and the words rising from within her gut, mimics American culture's own fixation on the female body because it portrays the lack of control many women feel they maintain over their own rights to their bodies, as well as the lack of control traditionalists feel they possess over the changing ideas of what "feminine" means.

Special attention to the female body continues within movies containing demonic possession, continuing to represent the second and third waves of feminism present in American politics between the years of 1983 with the making of *The Evil Dead* and 2017 with *Annabelle: Creation*. During these years, the transition between the second and third waves of feminism meant that the same core issues addressed are readdressed with more tactical moves. In other words, "third-wavers," as described by writer R. Claire Snyder, "embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification" (1). Progressively more evident in the years 1973, 1981, and 2017, feminists develop more tactical measures rather than theoretical arguments to approach the same problems. Through this, the act of being a feminist becomes an even more polarizing label, as the subject of feminism becomes both more mundane and more confrontational.

The Evil Dead, for example, is far less subtle in its symbolism over loss of control. As objections to rape and sexual harassment become more outspoken and frequent, *The Evil Dead* reflects the second-wave drive to recognize the brutality of rape, but also insists on displaying that brutality on the big screen. In the movie, a group of college kids are trapped in the middle of the woods. Possessed trees violently rape Cheryl, one of these college kids, in a horrific scene (24:41-29:33). The film does little to hide the terribly horrific experience of rape, the action taken by trees rather than another human adding a terrifying and animalistic element to the act that caused many audiences to become sick in much the same way as *The Exorcist*. Upon its release, the film was given an X rating and deemed a "video nasty" for its violent depictions and pornographic elements (Kermode 65-67). Despite predictions of a horrified first reaction, director Sam Raimi stated that he wanted both the scene and the movie as gruesome as possible with little interest in fear or censorship. This approach, in turn, caused the film to be even more polarizing. Although the director made the scene as horrifying as possible in order to mimic the fear of women at the time and cause outrage by the thought that terrible people carry out such actions, many reactions to the movie deemed the scene more outrageous for its nonsensical nature and subsequently deemed offensive. The call for censorship, driven by both feminists and traditionalists alike, of the rape scene, as well as of many other scenes in the movie, reinforced the idea that society needed

to avoid discussing, displaying, or worst of all, reimagining such topics in a public setting (Kermode 66). Despite this attitude, viewers continued to flock to the movie once word of its infamy spread, regardless of its lack of sensitivity to traditionally unspoken rules about appropriate topics to discuss concerning treatment of the female body, and film industries continued to create more movies that disregarded these rules.

Like in *The Evil Dead* and *The Exorcist*, *Annabelle: Creation* portrays unyielding examples of issues presented by feminism at the time of its release, this time with more focus on the inversion of innocence and traditional femininity. Made over three decades later in 2017, *Annabelle: Creation* portrays another young girl of whom evil takes advantage. Evil, however, no longer masquerades as the traditional demon nor as a group of possessed tree limbs. In this film, the demon pretends to be the ghost of the lost daughter of a couple, Samuel and Esther Mullins, who recently opened their home to six orphans and their guardian Sister Charlotte. In this movie, evil hides behind the face of innocence and works to possess only young girls. The inversion of femininity is depicted through the way in which the demon pretends to be a young innocent girl and later a porcelain doll, as well as in the way that it focuses on tormenting and controlling other young girls.

By taking classic symbols of innocence and young femininity, like the doll and the little girl, and turning them ugly and evil, the movie comments on the fear that feminism eradicates what femininity truly means. Just like in 1981, polarizing ideas on what feminism really means were alive in 2017. The third wave of feminism continued to find more ways to boldly present the motives of second wave feminists, and the objections stayed the same despite vastly changing tactics. In *Annabelle: Creation*, the young females fall prey to evil, and what makes them innocent and “feminine” is destroyed and replaced by a mirror opposite creature of evil and ill-intent. The girls, however, eventually save themselves from the possessed doll, but not by behaving helplessly or innocently. When Janice, one of the orphans, becomes possessed, the girls react violently in order to save themselves. For example, another orphan, Linda, whom the demon also torments, throws the porcelain doll down the well (1:12:25-1:12:37), and Sister Janet saves the girls by locking young Janice, the doll, and the demon in a closet until the police arrive (1:31:17). Meanwhile, Samuel Mullins, previously expected to pull his weight in saving the girls, ends up defeated by the demons. The added fact that the girls must go against the traditional idea of innocence and femininity to survive contrasts the idea that feminism is attempting to destroy what it means to have femininity.

Infestation, Oppression, and Possession of the American Culture

Ed Warren, the un-ordained exorcist in the movie *The Conjuring*, describes the process of possession as occurring in three stages: infestation, oppression, and possession (44:37-45:07). The first stage, he explains, consists of subtle evidences of the coming evil. “That’s the whispering,” he states. “The footsteps, the feeling of another presence which ultimately grows into oppression” (44:41). Oppression continues the process as the stage in which the external force begins to target and affect certain members of the household more strongly, while others continue to notice its impending presence. Finally, possession occurs, the stage where the force ingrains itself not only in those it previously oppressed, but also in the household itself.

Through these stages, the metaphor of a possessed society becomes fully illuminated. Political polarization did not happen overnight, and it changed forms, tactics, and motives throughout the years between the making of *The Exorcist* to the release of *The Conjuring*. Polarization became stronger and ingrained itself further in society, resulting in more outward representations of its effect within “the household”—in this case, the United States. These outward representations, as is the natural process within a society, became the pop culture we consume, the continuing circulation of politically themed metaphors further cementing American fascination with polarized ideologies. Indeed, the political climate has always haunted pop culture, resulting in a society where we feel its presence in every aspect of our lives. American society is possessed by the concept of political polarization. The possession continues to seep more deeply into the foundation of American society: gradually with continual reinterpretations of the same ideas and the same citizens which flock to consume them.

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