

RESIDENT EVIL: HORROR FILM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA CULTURE

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This paper argues that horror movies are an important component of meaning exploration in contemporary media culture and as such should have a place in our explorations of contemporary theology.

Like other forms of art and media, film has always presented itself as an alternative stream of meaning making, by presenting stories about life to an ever-growing audience. In the past few decades, the growth of electronic media, such as television and film, along with the continual decline in Church membership, has given the structures of electronic media communication a new power as a meaning-making institution.

An analysis of horror movies shows a number of important themes that are not foreign to formal theological discourse. Hence they posit an alternative centre for religious meaning making. These themes impact on the religious identity of participants in contemporary popular culture, including members of established Christian communities, who draw on stories from popular culture in understanding what it means to be Christian.

The Culture of Religion or the Religiousness of Culture?

The act of religion is the act of constructing and maintaining a set of beliefs and material practices which provide meaning to one's life amidst the universe of known experience. This set of beliefs offers more than a way of answering the question, "Why am I here?" It provides a framework by which one sets oneself among others, identifies a purpose in life, hope for the future and a pathway for the rest of one's life.

Constructing a religious identity is a cultural pursuit. Culture is an essential part of human living, and defines all human behaviour beyond basic biological imperatives. When we talk about where we belong in the world, how we act in it or how we should act in it, we are talking about culture.¹

Making religion is a cultural activity because it is a social one. Just as humans find identity through belonging to a group, we find religious identity through our association with a religious group. Groups as small as a rural parish youth group and as large as a nation, are defined by their culture.

Moreover, religion is a communicative event. Belief in a supernatural order or a divinity is manifested when it is communicated, and determined by how it is expressed between people. People “find religion” when something is communicated to them. Members of a religious group share common symbols, and forms of expression by which to reinforce their communal and individual identity in their religion.

Similarly, culture is a religious activity. How a community of people frame their understanding of the universe is a product of the beliefs and values that make up that understanding. How people make sense of the mysteries of life impacts on what they communicate to the world in their language and behaviour – their culture. Culture and religion are interdependent in the making of identity. For these reasons, talking about religion cannot be confined to the cloisters of churches and theological institutions. Religious discourse happens in every part of life, and as such theologians need to recognise how culture impacts on the formation of people’s religious identity.

Horror as Ritual Activity

Film is popular culture’s second most popular audio-visual medium (behind television). The movie theatre is a shared experience, a communal ritual involving an entrance into a story, an affective experience, a suspension of belief, then a return to the everyday world. It is a place where the mythic enters the ordinary for the public. It is where the myths that found and shape our culture are retold, reworked and reinforced.²

¹ Tanner, K. *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 25-26.

² D. Thorburn, “Television as Aesthetic Medium,” *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press* (ed. J. W. Carey; Newbury Park: Sage, 1988) 48-66, 56-57.

Common to most contemporary horror films is a narrative sequence containing the following elements:

1. The establishment of a peaceful, normal society, such as a quiet country town, or a relaxed and fun-loving starship crew.
2. The introduction of a threat, perhaps known only to a few marginal (or marginalised) characters.
3. The growth or persistence of the threat, once revealed to all major characters, as it kills the cast one by one.
4. The final battle between the threat and the remaining main characters.
5. A resolution with limited closure: not a return to the previous world, but rather an uncomfortable quiet based on a realisation that the threat exists and may return (as a prelude to a possible sequel, if not merely a loss of innocence).³

The narrative sequence above offers an insight into the ritual quality of participating in film audience. Rituals are activities where the mythic is played in real terms, where participants are drawn into an experience of *communitas* (the world of myth) while at the edge of *societas* (the everyday world). To arrive at the beginning of a movie with an impression of the world order, and to depart from the movie with a different impression, is a ritual function of the film experience.

Horror film offers us a picture of the marginal in our mythical make-up of the world. It asks us to consider what we overlook. In doing so, it compels us to question our confidence in our understanding of the world order.

This is not to equate going to the movies with the practice of religion. Instead, films, like other mass media, provide for the ritual communication of meaning, and like all communal stories have an impact on values and beliefs. Horror films enter our culture through social gathering and become a commodity of the culture of the viewers. These commodities, like the stories, values and ideals carried in religious acts, impact on the cultural, and therefore religious, identity of the culture's members. The next section treats a small number of films, to focus on the theological ideas or questions brought to film audiences and the impact on religious identity in contemporary film culture.

³ T. Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The contemporary horror film and postmodern theory," *The Film Cultures Reader* (ed. G. Turner; London: Routledge, 2002) 268-75, 271.

Theological Conversations in Contemporary Horror

This section outlines four theological conversations that arise in the nine films under study. There is a reason for choosing to apply the term “conversation” rather than “statement” or “proposition”. While films do endorse a certain viewpoint on issues, they do more than merely state it. I have called these conversations: *Power of the Ancient*; *Resident Evil*; *Secret Story*, *Secret Society*; and *A Triumphant Life*.

Power of the Ancient

These movies explore the concept of an ancient truth, ignored or replaced by modern rationalism, that forces its way into the lives of the films’ protagonists. They struggle to accept this truth and how it completely overturns their previous understanding of themselves and their world.

The opening credits of *Stigmata* vividly display this theme. It rapidly alternates between religious imagery (a crucified Jesus, crosses, spilled wine and blood) and youthful living (Frankie working at the beauty salon, clothes shopping, drinking in a night club, taking her boyfriend home) – setting an opposition that clashes throughout the movie. Traditional Christian imagery such as doves, candles and water to evoke anticipation of high impact events such as an attack of stigmata or a possession on the main character.

In *Lost Souls*, sepia and monochrome colour schemes portray an old world New York and New Jersey, especially in settings such as the psychiatric hospital, the monastery, Peter Kelson’s apartment and office, and the dinner party where an attempt on his life was made. Slow motion sequences create a feeling of spiritual presence. The exorcist team enter the hospital in slow motion, busy street life is interrupted by slow motion sequences of leaves blowing into the air, dogs barking, and women in kimonos walking down street steps.

The narrative of *Alien Resurrection* begins to climax at the moment Ripley and the smugglers realise that Call is a synthetic. Call retells two centuries of history to Ripley – the recall of synthetics from production, the escape and organisation of rebel synthetics, and the mission to thwart government endeavours to use and control the alien monsters – in the ship’s chapel, underneath a glowing fluorescent cross, revealing a deeper truth to her existence.

The dichotomy between ancient knowledge and contemporary life is shown in each film: between religious asceticism and youthful abundance in *Stigmata*, between old world wisdom and modern enlightenment in *Lost Souls*, and between experienced caution and ignorant greed in *Alien Resurrection*.

These movies raise the questions, Is there any merit in contemporising Christian rituals and practices? Or do we lose meaning in our attempts to make Christian life more relevant to modern day life through the eradication of perceived outdated forms? These films suggest traditional explanations (such as miracles and the Devil), seemingly discarded in favour of science and logic, still have the power to affect identity in modern culture. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

These films find an affinity with pre-Reformation Christian imagery and use it to display their fictional “truth”. These films identify with a quest for truth, something that tells us about who we are, that cannot be found in modern culture alone. Seeking these truths recaptures old forms, symbols and rituals.

Resident Evil

Horror films explore the notion of evil more than any other genre. For these films, evil is portrayed in a variety of symbols, yet commonalities exist. The following is a brief overview of how evil is portrayed.

Evil as Presence

The story of Peter Kelson in *Lost Souls* opens with a television interview where he claims, “I don’t believe in Evil, with a capital E.” For this character, evil is an illusion, becoming less mystifying as we get closer to it. Horror films, by and large, thwart this understanding. In all films treated, evil is seen as a presence of something rational, intentional and tangible, rather than as something accidental, an absence or dysfunction of rationality.

Each movie adds its own form to this notion. In both *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, evil has human form, but moves and acts as if without emotion, with a single desire to destroy. In *Alien Resurrection* and *Pitch Black* the form is of monsters, although we are led to question the judicious morality of the lead characters in both films. *Event Horizon* portrays evil as a place, likened to hell, though not named as such, where pure chaos reigns. *Lost Souls* and *Stigmata* deify the form of evil, the Devil for the former and Christ for the latter. In a similar way, *Final Destination* portrays death as a rational force. *Resident Evil* provides a number of personifications, including an artificial intelligence, a crowd of brain-dead and hungry zombies and a lizard-like monster made purely of virus cells.

Evil exists in a coupling of directions: the Great One, a single creature exerting an immense power outward (the Devil in *Lost Souls*, *Resident Evil*’s artificial intelligence, the masked killer of *Scream*); and the Multitude, an immense number of entities

which close inward (the aliens in both *Alien Resurrection* and *Pitch Black*). Horror endeavours to frame the immensity and explosiveness of our imaginations, and its reverse, entrapment and insidiousness.⁴

Evil Participates in Moral Society

Enlightenment philosophy told us that the rational individual is the moral individual. The holocaust of World War II destroyed the West's faith in this, becoming the nightmare of the First World's meta-narrative. Horror movies place our nightmares on the screen, suggesting that mere acceptance of our moral culture does not make us safe from harm. Evil is not a divorce from morality, but plays in our institutions which make our values, whether they be B-grade video producers, pharmaceutical companies or even governments. Horror movies challenge their audience to participate in the identification and suspicion of the meta-narrative.

Secret Story, Secret Society

These films acknowledge that the identification and suspicion of cultural values will result in a rejection by ordinary people. For these films, knowledge of evil necessitates a marginalisation from the "normal" world of the narrative. Some characters are deployed in horror film narratives to offer glimpses into the real truth behind events. Sometimes these characters are marginalised by circumstances within the narrative, and often disappear or are "killed off", leaving the main character to uncover the rest of the story. The document translator, who walks the halls of power in the Vatican but is placed under suspicion by bishops, offers secrets to Fr Kiernan in *Stigmata*. Call, in *Alien Resurrection*, belongs to an underground group of illegal synthetics who have carried the story of the original Ripley and the government's plans to subdue and control the aliens. *Lost Soul's* Deacon Townsend, aware of the prophecy centred around Peter Kelson, follows his fate and makes an attempt on Kelson's life, creating further suspicion around his colleague, Maya Larkin, whose research has already been rejected by the Church's administration.

These characters may also be depicted as suspicious or untrustworthy, thereby being made marginal to the audience. Such characters are Matthew in *Resident Evil*, who trespasses into the Hive and is held captive by the rescue team, and the funeral home's care-taker in *Final Destination*, whose deep voice, and knowledge of, yet apparent indifference to, Death's design, make him appear an accomplice.

⁴ K. J. Schneider, *Horror and the Holy: Wisdom-Teachings of the Monster Tale* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993) 7.

Horror seeks to lead the audience to find an affinity with those whose awareness of the narrative's fictional truth separates them from the film's fictional world. Horror portrays a suspicion of moral culture and an affinity with that which is marginal. Religious identity, a membership to a truth, means a connection with that which is of questionable reputation to the moral and cultural Establishment of mainstream society.

A Triumphant Life

Faithful living, in these filmic worlds, intrinsically involves joining the battle against evil on the side of good. In *Scream*, Randy, the video store clerk, states that there are simple rules for surviving a horror movie. One of these, is to remain a virgin – in horror movies, losing one's virginity is punishable by serial murder. Randy's redeeming quality is the fact that despite his detailed knowledge of horror film, he refuses to treat the events as if they were a horror film. While his friends left to "watch" the crime scene of their school principal's murder, he chose to stay, knowing that these events were real and not to be received with such emotional distance. Gail Weathers, the news reporter, is also redeemed in the same way. She left her video camera behind, losing her mediated distance from events, to participate in the rescue of the main character.

These movies have one common theme – in order to defeat the evil that lurks through the film, characters must work to relinquish that which the evil is looking to thwart. In the film *Event Horizon*, the audience learns that Captain Miller is suffering the guilt of choosing to let an inferior be killed whilst trying to save the rest of his command. His refusal to be taunted by a stream of images of this act allowed him to escape. Likewise, Julie manages to overcome her guilt over the car accident in *Last Summer* and stop believing she deserved the stalking by the supposed victim.

Alice succeeds in escaping the Hive in *Resident Evil*, only by choosing to trust Matthew and confessing that she had played a part in the destruction of the Hive's security. Ripley only succeeds in destroying the last alien in *Alien Resurrection* by rejecting that part of her which she saw as alien. Her final entry into Earth's atmosphere is symbolic of her acceptance of her humanity.

Conversely, Peter Kelson's continued disbelief in his identity, despite Maya Larkin's exposure of the threat caused by his family, leads to his execution by Maya in the final seconds of the film.

Surviving a horror movie involves accepting that there is a battle to be undertaken with the world at large. Moral society is not yet complete. To accept a religious identity is to accept something different from the rest of the world, perhaps at odds with it. To achieve that identity's potential is to join the fight against that which thwarts the making of a truly justified society.

Implications for Contemporary Theology

What Is It About Horror?

Lynn Schofield Clark suggests there is rebellion in watching horror film.

[Experimentations with the supernatural] also, of course, challenge authority. Teens know that adults consider such actions to be deviant and even dangerous; that is part of their appeal. Like séances and other supernatural activities, horror films and television programs give young viewers a chance to vicariously participate in rebellion while also containing their fears through its symbolic defeat.⁵

For Schofield Clark, horror films explore the margins of the contemporary world order by placing audiences' fears about death, the afterlife, evil etc., on screen and then relieving them through the defeat of the horror and the re-establishment of the world order.

While I agree with this understanding of the popularity of horror film in teen culture, I would add that horror film does more than identifying and relieving audiences' fears. Horror also has the ability, and task, of making a narrative world that makes viewers doubt society's grasp of reality. *Resident Evil*, for example, suggests that corporations work on dangerous projects protected from scrutiny. *Final Destination* offers us information we would prefer to reject on the nature of death. *Event Horizon* makes it known there is more to the universe than empty space. *Stigmata* shows us not everything can be explained rationally.

The rebellion in watching horror film is not just in participating in a dangerous world. It includes a passive aggression towards our society's view of the real world and comfort in the established world order. Being involved in these films means considering the rejection of the homiletic descriptions of God, good and evil, earthly existence and a justified society produced in the institutions of government, family, university and mainstream religion.

In this way, horror film does more than offer opportunity for vicarious participation. It offers a place to do theology, in a new way which is free from the perceived constraints of traditional ways of thinking.

⁵ Schofield L. Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 63.

Theology as Mythic and Marginal

Schofield Clark also recognises that American evangelicalism speaks to these themes more so than Western Protestantism or Catholicism.

Evangelicalism has not provided the cause for our concerns with evil, but due to the often acknowledged connections between culture and the religious heritage of the United States, evangelicalism has inadvertently provided a framework for thinking about and representing evil in popular culture. Evangelicals have long been concerned with the pervasiveness of evil in the world, and with the belief in a transcendent God who will eventually triumph over evil. Evangelical traditions [...] are therefore seeking not only to fight evil, but to define it.⁶

The current wave of evangelicalism could be said to speak to believers by using themes already embedded in their culture: that the themes current in their communication “connect the dots” of one’s view of the world in the same constellation as film narratives.

Horror films offer a *myth* which is *marginal*. The telling of a story constructs a world of narrative symbol that offers a certain meaning to the real lives of an audience. This meaning is seen as foreign to the present social construct of reality, and marginalises those who align themselves with this meaning with the rest of society.

Is the decline of traditional forms of religion explained by their failure to provide a new way of seeing the world which offers believers a new sense of identity as different from the rest of the world? Is the rise of evangelicalism and televangelism explainable in the same way?

In any case, the criticism of denominations in decline is that they are “out of touch” with culture, and display outdated values. This is described by an emphasis in communicating theology in literal and rational terms, rather than inviting the audience into myth.

Theology as Genre

The Synoptic Gospels offer a view of how Jesus talked to the people during his earthly ministry. Jesus was a product of his time, a predominantly oral culture, where story-telling was a major form of communication. The written word was available only to the educated elite, who at their own discretion would pass on knowledge to believers.

⁶ Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 26.

A popular form of Jesus' communication was parable. Peter Horsfield recognises seven characteristics of the parables of Jesus, which I wish to summarise in three.⁷

Rhythm and realism

Jesus uses everyday characters and situations such as shepherds, rural families and wedding banquets. He refrains from using religious language that may be inaccessible to the uneducated, instead focusing on making pictures that would make sense to the widest audience.

His characters are simple and serve as universal symbols. The use of repetition in his narrative discourse offers audiences a rhythm by which they could enter and feel comfort in the world of the story, to then "play" with audiences' expectations and responses.

Disorientation

While the stories first construct a realistic narrative drama, that world-order is then perverted, in an endeavour to confront audiences' expectations. Well-known examples are the father's welcome and celebration of the return of his wayward son (Luke 15:11-32), and the hospitality and compassion of the Samaritan outcast (Luke 10:25-37).

Hearers of the story are invited to construct their own meaning, to consider the symbols displayed in a new dimension. They are then left to question the intention of the story-teller.

Lack of resolution

Only in one instance retold in the Gospels (Luke 8:4-15 – the Parable of the Good Sower) does Jesus explain the meaning of his parables, and even then, it is only revealed to a select few. In the other instances, the stories are left open to interpretation by the audiences themselves.

There is a political agenda in his story-telling. Jesus tells of the God-world relationship in stories with realistic/accessible characters and situations, and leaves the stories open for the audience to make meaning from them. In doing so, Jesus moves the power to make theology away from the religious elite to the people.

⁷ Peter Horsfield, *The Mediated Spirit* [CD-ROM] (Melbourne: Uniting Church in Australia, 2002).

This rhythm of invitation, disorientation and interpretation is the work of an audience immersed in a *genre*. To draw viewers into a symbolic world, whether in front of a story-teller, a book or a movie screen, and challenge them to make meaning out of it is to set them on the same task as theologians. Horror movies, in setting audiences in the world of the unknown and unknowable, the marginal in our established world-view, assume a capability once reserved only for the institutions of organised religion.

Horror films, as much as all other forms of audio-visual media, present a new forum for theological discourse that impacts on Christian life. In the same way as Luke's Jesus did in the first century, horror films work to present symbols, texts and structures that draw audiences into thinking about the cosmos, and their place in it, in new ways.

Horror films offer audiences a new way of thinking about religion, so they offer a space to think theologically, away from the structures of traditional religious discourse. Therefore, churches can no longer be seen as the only authority over what it means to be religious. People immersed in popular culture will use information received both from mass media, such as horror film, and from traditional structures, to work that out for themselves.

Filmography

Alien Resurrection

1997

Twentieth Century Fox: A Brandywine Production

Producer: Bill Badalato

Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet

Screenplay: Joss Whedon

Event Horizon

1997

Paramount Pictures/Lawrence Gordon: A Golar Production

Producers: Lloyd Levin, Lawrence Gordon, Jeremy Bolt

Director: Paul WS Anderson

Screenplay: Philip Eisner

Final Destination

2000

New Line Cinema: A Warren Zide – Craig Perry Production

Producer: Glen Morgan

Director: James Wong

Screenplay: Glen Morgan

I Know What You Did Last Summer

1997

Columbia Pictures: A Mandalay Entertainment Production

Producers: Neal H. Moritz, Stokely Chaffin, Erik Feig

Director: Jim Gillespie

Screenplay: Kevin Williamson

Lost Souls

2000

New Line Cinema: A Prufrock Pictures Production

Producer: Ninar Sadowski and Meg Ryan

Director: Janusz Kaminski

Screenplay: Pierce Gardner

Pitch Black

2000

Universal Pictures: An Interscope Communications Production

Producer: Tom Engelman

Director: David Twohy

Screenplay: Jim Wheat, Ken Wheat, David Twohy

Resident Evil

2002

Metropolitan Film: A Constantin Film – New Legacy – Davis Films Production

Producer: Bernd Eichinger

Director: Paul WS Anderson

Screenplay: Paul WS Anderson

Scream

1996

Dimension Films: A Woods Entertainment Production

Producers: Cary Woods and Cathy Konrad

Director: Wes Craven

Screenplay: Kevin Williamson

Stigmata

1999

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: An FGM Entertainment Production

Producer: Frank Mancuso

Director: Rupert Wainwright

Screenplay: Tom Lazarus