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### Narrative Perversity in The Exorcist

“The Exorcist” was released in 1973 and received significant attention from audiences and critics for its shocking material. William Friedkin directed this movie which is an adaptation of the horror novel by William Peter Blatty published two years prior in 1971. The film depicts the story of Reagan MacNeil, a twelve-year-old girl that falls victim to a powerful demon that possesses her body and transforms an innocent child into a frightening monster that is capable of murder. Viewers were surprised by the way Friedkin incorporated such graphic content into “The Exorcist” and this created a shock factor at face-value with jump scares and gore. However, the production team created a film that went much deeper than that. It gained so much critical acclaim and popularity through its use of narrative perversity, as explained in Todd Berliner’s book, “Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema.” “Seventies films show a perverse tendency to integrate, in incidental ways, narrative and stylistic devices counterproductive to the films’ overt and essential narrative purposes. The films insist on including incongruous ideas and formal devices that seem out of harmony with the work as a whole and threaten its narrative, generic, or conceptual logic. Rather than furthering causal narration, such incongruities gratuitously hinder causality. Moreover, many seventies films include narratively superfluous stylistic ornamentation that draws viewer attention away from plot patterning and creates distracting stylistic systems that rival classical narration and compete with it for prominence.” These seemingly unnecessary stylistic devices seem counterproductive by inhibiting plot progression, and distract viewers from the essential storyline by creating an additional unique plot from visual images. I believe William Friedkin and the production team applied narrative perversity to “The Exorcist” through distracting stylistic devices such as the

contrast of characters and traditional roles, which combined to force audiences to think creatively about the images that were presented to them.

One of the visual elements that seems counterproductive to the plot patterning of the film is the constant contrast between two of the main characters, Father Karras and Mrs. MacNeil. The camera seems to follow these two people through the majority of the film, but interchangeably until the end. They live in different areas, engage in separate activities, and exist separately while the essential plot progresses with Reagan becoming possessed. Father Karras and Mrs. MacNeil do not actually meet until about two-thirds through the movie. The director seems to purposely create this sense of distinction between the two characters until they come together and help Reagan. Visually, they differ drastically in appearance. Karras never seems to smile in the film, wears his priest uniform or cheap clothing, and has a rugged appearance as described by Mrs. MacNeil as “very intense looking” when asking Father Dyer about him at a party. Reagan’s mother, instead, tends to have a joyful outward appearance in the first half of the film and wears elegant clothing.

The director fluctuates between both characters immediately after one another revealing strong differences in their lifestyles. At the beginning, we see Mrs. MacNeil playing the lead role in a scene for her upcoming film with assistants applying her makeup as she walks toward the crowd of students in front of the camera. Immediately after, the camera pans to Father Karras who walks silently away from the crowd, staring down at the ground. Later, Reagan and her mother are shown playing in their house and laughing together, but the production team decides to make a quick cut to Father Karras walking up the stairs to a deserted train station at night. In order to portray the financial differences between these two characters, Friedkin places them both at their particular doctor’s offices. In one scene, Mrs. MacNeil sits in a spacious waiting

room with leather chairs. Karras then has to rush to a nursing home where his mother must stay due to his lack of finances. Here, he is forced to stand behind a metal fence separating the patients in a dark and dreary building. One of the most stark contrasts in the film comes about halfway through, when audiences transition from Karras violently punching a boxing bag in the gym with sweaty workout clothes on, straight to a party at the MacNeil's home filled with people in expensive clothing enjoying each other's company. All of these situations illustrate the fact that Karras lives a life in solitude compared to Mrs. MacNeil who is usually the center of attention in films and her social life.

Also, when Reagan becomes ill, her mother persistently pursues medical diagnoses without a second thought. However, when Father Karras learns of Reagan's condition while talking in the park, he suggests that he can see her as a psychiatrist instead of referring her to a medical doctor. Karras deals primarily with religion and psychiatry which focus on beliefs, while Mrs. MacNeil desperately hopes to find a concrete problem with her daughter than can be solved through medicine. In addition to these contrasts of appearance and priorities, the director does seem to connect them in strange ways of similarity. They both take care of women in need; Mrs. MacNeil looks after her daughter while Father Karras is seen visiting his elderly mother and bandaging her injured leg. They also seem to engage in careers that involve pretending; the mother is an actor in film portraying false identities, while viewers overhear Karras admitting that he feels like a fraud in his profession as a priest since he has lost his faith. The contrast between characters creates a stylistic element to the film that is counterproductive to the essential narration. It splits the storyline between two characters living in different worlds until the very end.

In addition to contrasting each other, the characters also directly oppose the traditional roles they fulfill within the film. Father Karras does not conform to the typical image of a Catholic priest. Traditionally, most people might consider a member of his position as being peaceful, religious, and never indulging in unhealthy habits. However, Karras is depicted in the film as a boxer who smokes cigarettes and drinks alcohol. He even admits to losing his faith in the very religion that he represents. Additionally, he studied psychiatry extensively which was not common for members of the Catholic Church during this time, as explained through a real life figure with the same qualifications of Karras. “When I began to think about psychiatry as a medical specialty in 1963, I was vaguely aware of a tension between the church and psychiatry. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen suggested on his weekly television show that Catholics would not need a psychiatrist if they made a good confession. G. K. Chesterton had put it somewhat differently: Psychoanalysis is confession without absolution. This type of innuendo from prominent Catholics slowed down the acceptance of psychiatry as a valuable part of Catholic health care” (O’Connell). Psychiatry was not universally accepted by the Catholic church in the era that “The Exorcist” was released and based in, but Karras exists as an opposition to the traditional role of priest. Mrs. MacNeil is a single-parent taking care of a young girl without the help of a husband. Stereotypically, people may assume that someone in her position would be struggling financially, working multiple jobs while not being able to spend time her child, and actively seeking a love interest for companionship. Reagan’s mother does not satisfy any of these traits. She exists in the film as a strong, independent woman who has a successful acting career with a luxurious house and elegant clothing. Mrs. MacNeil has significant free time to spend with her daughter as she is shown taking her to numerous doctor visits, tucking her into bed and checking on her multiple times during the nights, and also planning to take her on a trip to Europe before she became ill.

When Reagan assumes her mother is romantically interested in Burke, she actively denies it and does not seem interested in seeking a significant other throughout the entire film. Similar to Karras contrasting the traditional role of priest, Mrs. MacNeil contrasts the stereotypical role of single-mother. The difference between roles and how they are portrayed in the film creates a visual element that rivals and competes with classical narration for prominence. Instead of focusing on the main plot, these nuances make audiences constantly wonder, “Why are they showing me this?”

Berliner states that seventies film tend to include stylistic devices that distract viewers from the main storyline and seem counterproductive to plot progression. In the case of “The Exorcist,” I believe this is true due to the constant contrasting of Father Karras and Mrs. MacNeil, as well as the traditional roles they fulfill. Throughout the majority of the film, they exist separately which essentially splits the story into two plots until they finally meet near the end to help Reagan. Also, Father Karras lives in opposition to the expectations society tends to have for Catholic priests, while Mrs. MacNeil does not conform to stereotypes of a single-mother. After applying these stylistic contrasts throughout the movie, the production company ends up creating an unexpected alliance between two differing characters in order to save a twelve-year-old girl from demonic possession. In the scene at the park, when they meet for the first time, Reagan’s mother appears to have transformed to have much more in common with Father Karras. She is shown in dark sunglasses, smoking, and has a bruise on her cheek that resembles an injury a boxer might sustain. Together, this all forces audiences to question what these devices mean in terms of plot and symbolism.

Works Cited

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