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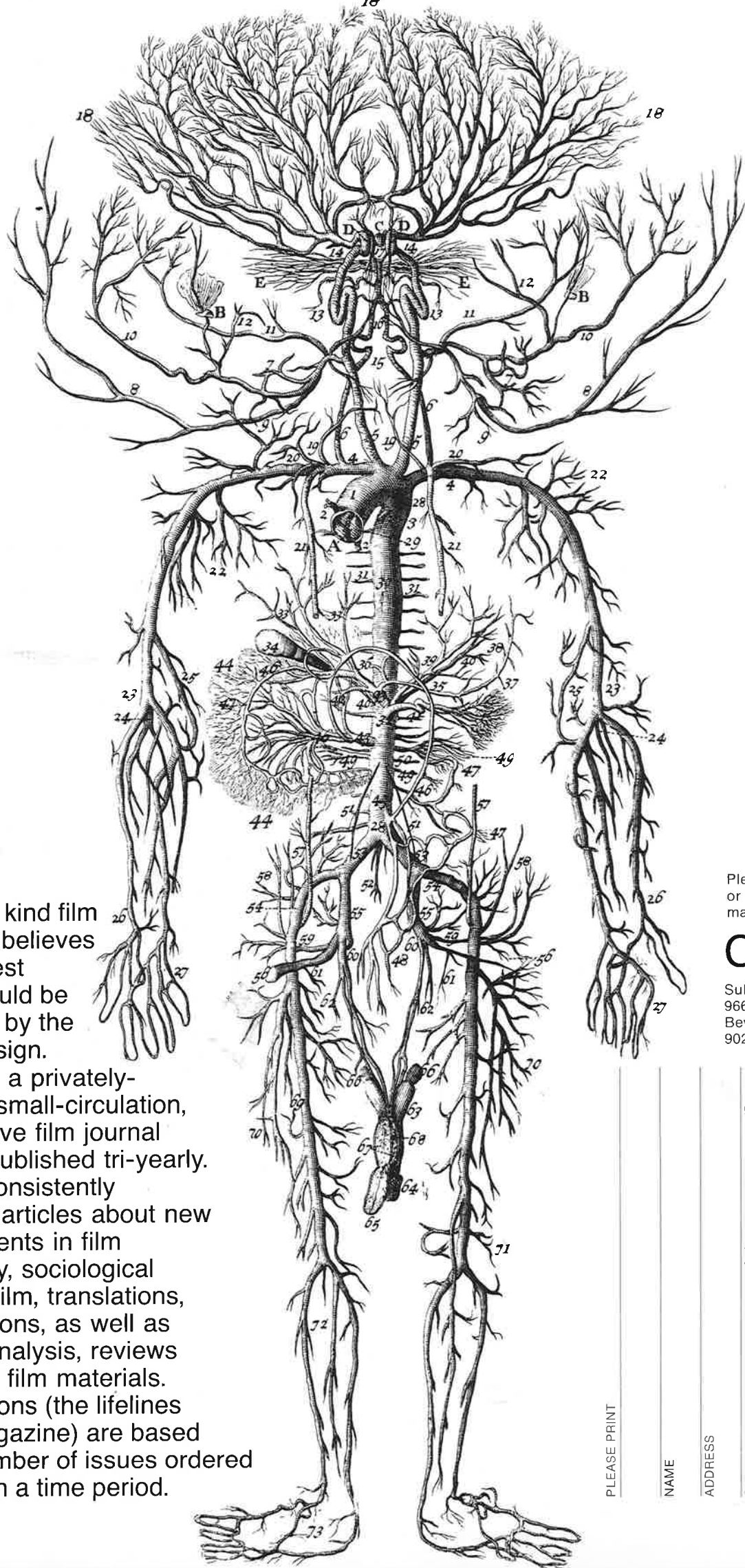
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THE EXORCIST &
DON'T LOOK NOW

DOROTHY ARZNER

CURTIS
HARRINGTON



CINEMA,

a one of a kind film magazine believes that the best in film should be presented by the best in design.

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SEEING IS BELIEVING

THE EXORCIST & DON'T LOOK NOW

by Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston

The supernatural is "now" cinema. Audiences have abandoned Watergate realism to follow movies into other worlds. In Los Angeles and New York, huge crowds wait to see William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, a big-budget Hollywood shocker. Britain's Nicolas Roeg may have his first U.S. commercial success with the occult *Don't Look Now*, while his earlier masterpieces, *Performance* and *Walkabout*, remain only cult favorites. Gerard Damiano's *The Devil in Miss Jones* is being touted as "the best of the fuck films," aesthetically surpassing *Deep Throat*, his first box office block buster, and Georgina Spelvin, the leading lady, has moved on to new

demonic tricks in *Sexual Witchcraft*. Kenneth Anger, veteran of the underground scene, has returned to the U.S., appearing in major cities with his own demonic retrospective to raise funds for *Lucifer Rising*, his current work-in-progress. At a time when interest in underground is waning, Anger's films attracted turn-away crowds at L.A.'s Vanguard Theater.

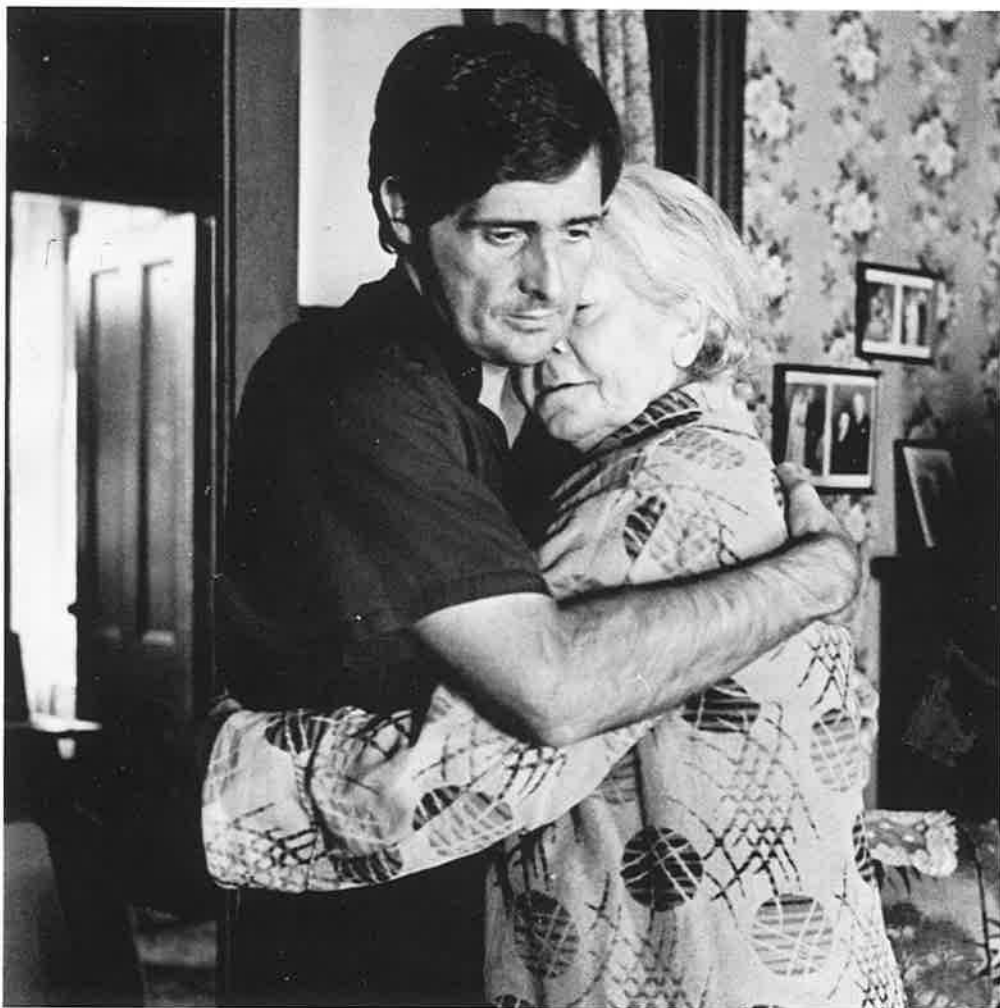
The appearance and popularity of these films suggest that new kinds of belief and morality may be rushing in to replace the almost intolerable decadence, corruption, and cynicism which currently mark our national experience. In a spirit of self-protection,

though, it behooves us to see what is being offered. Why the demonic emphasis? Recently, several films have attempted to get back to belief in the Good by linking the liberated present with the religious past—e.g., *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, and *Brother Sun Sister Moon*. They have obviously failed, perhaps because they associate Jesus and St. Francis with modern decadence and hustle. Mr. and Mrs. America do not identify, apparently, with spiritual leaders who are gay brothers or theatrical hippies.

The private eye film, another genre through which American cinema has traditionally ex-







The Exorcist



plored the confrontation between good and evil, has moved into self-reflexive irony (especially in *Gumshoe* and *The Long Goodbye*). Focus has shifted from a conflict between external evil and a personal moral code to an aesthetic harmony of witty tone and nostalgic style for both film and detective. Further, the detective film traditionally had an epistemological center; even if the villains were cops and politicians on the take, the primary questions were—who done it, and how to get the goods on him. Sherlock Holmes provides the archetype of the great empiricist with a feel for phenomena. In the new “cop” films (starting with Friedkin’s *French Connection*, but most particularly in *Electra Glide in Blue*, *Serpico*, *Busting*, and the pilot for the popular TV series—*Kojak* and the *Marcus-Nelson Murders*), which have partially usurped the detective and gangster genres, the shift is to existential questions. No longer an outlaw or outsider, the hero is now a member of the force, but individualized, ethnic, and even somewhat freaky. (Lt. Kinderman, the Jewish film buff in *The Exorcist*, and the weird Police Inspector in *Don’t Look Now* are both warm-hearted, intuitive data handlers.) In the cop films, the problem is this: in a culture where both cops and robbers are corrupt, how is the honest loner to fight the system and still protect society against the killers, rapists, robbers, and dealers. How can he retain his integrity and still be a member of a rotten establishment? In this double bind, he’s bound to lose.

Yet stylistic escape and individual action do not confront the metaphysical nature of external evil; this problem is the focus of the devil movies, which also grow out of a tradition—that of the gothic horror film. Both *Don’t Look Now* and *The Exorcist* reject the

assumptions of most other recent films in this genre. They deny psychological explanations of the supernatural, which control a film like Bergman’s *Hour of the Wolf* where the central figure is an artist whose demons, projected out of his madness, undermine the sanity of his wife. This pattern is analogous to the relationship between artist and audience where a filmmaker projects his demonic vision onto the screen in order to possess the consciousness of his audience. Despite the fact that Ken Russell’s *The Devils* also involves exorcism in a religious context, its vision of evil is highly secular. The devilish phenomena are theater pieces designed to win political power. When the devil is purged from Sister Jeanne, the visuals emphasize the elaborate props and the erotic delight of the onlookers. Even Father Grandier’s belief in God and Goodness is a means of resisting the pressures of King and Cardinal. The true precursor of *The Exorcist* and *Don’t Look Now* is *Rosemary’s Baby*. Although, like *Hour of the Wolf* and *The Devils*, it also has a self-reflexive dimension (the hero is an actor and his cohorts look like characters from old horror films), Polanski’s devil is an external force, a reality in the metaphysical organization of the universe, who cannot be explained away. The visual style also draws our attention to the objects, colors, textures, and surfaces of the environment rather than leading to symbolic interpretations. The concrete nature of the data raises questions about belief. What kind of empirical evidence is necessary to validate an expanded view of reality, or to prove the existence of the devil? As in *The Exorcist*, the devil is presented in a fully Christian context involving Christ and organized religion, but with one important difference. The birth of Rosemary’s devil child parodies the birth of Christ; this ironic complication obscures the clear antagonism between good and evil. In *The Exorcist*, there is no such confusion; Christ is the enemy of the devil, and the only opponent capable of vanquishing the evil one.

While we intend to explore *The Exorcist*

and *Don’t Look Now* in detail, *The Devil in Miss Jones* and *Lucifer Rising* also present interesting perspectives on the devil’s nature. In *Miss Jones*, the devil is a cock. In a fit of late adolescent despair, Miss Jones has slashed her wrists in the bathtub, only to wake up in that familiar way station from which souls are dispatched either up or down. But she regrets her hasty act because, alas, she is a virgin. Since her only sin, the suicide, is enough to mark her for the hot spot, she gets a temporary reprieve to explore the possibilities of lust—the most promising of her unexperienced sins. The film identifies demonic power with sex and death. Since she has already usurped control over her own death, Miss Jones is now ready to learn the sexual power game. The first demon she encounters is “the Teacher”; obeying his commands, she worships his enormous penis, pleading and coaxing, trying to learn the secrets of its power, and finally succeeding through possession. In the next scene, an encounter with a woman, the sex is mutual and the power shared. Then, she demonstrates her fully developed demonic pride by masturbating with Christian symbols—not a cross as in *The Exorcist*, but the forbidden fruit and hissing snake, whose darting tongue movements she mimics (a trick also performed by Friedkin’s precocious heroine). Next, Miss Jones grabs for bigger power in two unholy trinities. First, she and another woman pass back and forth a penis that is attached to an unidentified passive gentleman. Finally she directs the operations of two obliging studs, telling them exactly how, when, and where to get off. But despite her obvious delight with these adventures (which, unlike most porn stars, Georgina Spelvin successfully communicates), as one might expect, the devil’s instrument is double-edged; he giveth and he taketh away. When she finally gets there, Hell is the no-exit frustration of a wildly lascivious Miss Jones locked for all eternity in a room with a limp and whimpering man who has been driven mad by the devil’s tricks.

Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston are the authors of *Close-Up* (Harcourt Brace) and have published articles in numerous film magazines.

Though only a third completed, Kenneth Anger's *Lucifer Rising* promises an exaltation of Lucifer as a powerful angel that links the film to expressions of sympathy for the devil in recent movies and other art forms. Lucifer is presented as the angel of light, a source of power and beauty whose fall would be a tragedy rather than a rightful punishment for unholy pride. Instead of focusing on a violent sexuality like *Fireworks* and *Scorpio Rising*, it associates Lucifer with magic, ritual, and sensuous opulence, like Anger's *Inauguration of a Pleasure Dome* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother*. The imagery is dominated by a glowing sun illuminating the magnificent Egyptian temple ruins where incarnations of Isis and Osiris (played by Donald Cammel, Roeg's co-director of *Performance*) evoke the ancient powers. This sense of power is universalized by sequences showing Marianne Faithful and torch-light processions visiting Stonehenge and other mystic sites in Northern Europe. A young British rock and roll type, who alternately wears his funky clothes and the traditional heiratic robes of the Magus, treads a rainbow-hued conjuring circle. The segment ends with the appearance of a shining spaceship that moves slowly above the huge sculpture of a throned figure, implying a merging of past and future (suggestive of *Chariot of the Gods*) and transcending a limited Christian context.

All the films that we have mentioned are concerned with powerlessness in facing a desperate social and moral situation, and most of them are moving toward a mythic view of reality. As Northrop Frye suggests in *Anatomy of Criticism*, twentieth century art is dominated by the ironic mode in which the individual is helpless and dehumanized by the demonic transformation of the world in which he lives; the next phase, and the only possible escape, is through reconsideration of the mythic bases of his reality. In the detective films, since morality is disturbingly elusive, the filmmakers and detectives turn from fact-finding to high style and self-reflexive irony; they play with their own archetypes. In the cop movies, since evil lurks both within and without the individual and the social establishment, there are no easy answers and defeat is inevitable; the problems persist no matter whether the existential hero keeps trying or quits the force. But in either case, he must give up the dream of being a Captain Marvell or Dick Tracy, which made him become a cop in the first place. *Don't Look Now* and *Lucifer Rising* both acknowledge that there is an external power that is possibly dangerous and unknowable. Though the world is in a desperate situation, both films suggest (in very different ways) that the only fruitful attitude is to keep in touch with what is valuable in the past, while remaining open to new modes for the future, especially the possibility of expanded consciousness. But both *The Exorcist* and *The Devil in Miss Jones* deny the complexity and desperation by externalizing the evil and locating it handily in one mythic figure—the Christian devil. Though *Miss Jones* is now in a no-exit agony, if she'd avoided sin, she'd be in heaven. *The Exorcist's* devil is vulgar, limited, and also preoccupied with sex. Offered as a reactionary social corrective, he is seen as responsible for all modern evil; once we recognize this and call on the Church (and traditional morality), we can cast him out and make everything good again. Perhaps the ease of this solution lies at the heart of the film's popularity.

As a special effects movie, *The Exorcist* is extremely successful. Its power to terrify is largely based on the make-up and sound effects. You see before your own eyes a twelve year old child transformed into a yellow-eyed, thick-lipped, scarred and growling monster, who spews out jets of bright green bile. Plastic molds were made of Linda Blair's body to increase the authenticity of one of the devil's (and Friedkin's) best tricks—he turns the child's head around 360 degrees on her neck. The sound track is extremely loud, providing a cacaphony of noises that keeps the audience tense and edgy: the devil's poundings; the clanging hammers of the archeological dig; the city noises; the loud thud of punching bag and tennis balls; the roaring subway train; the intolerable screech

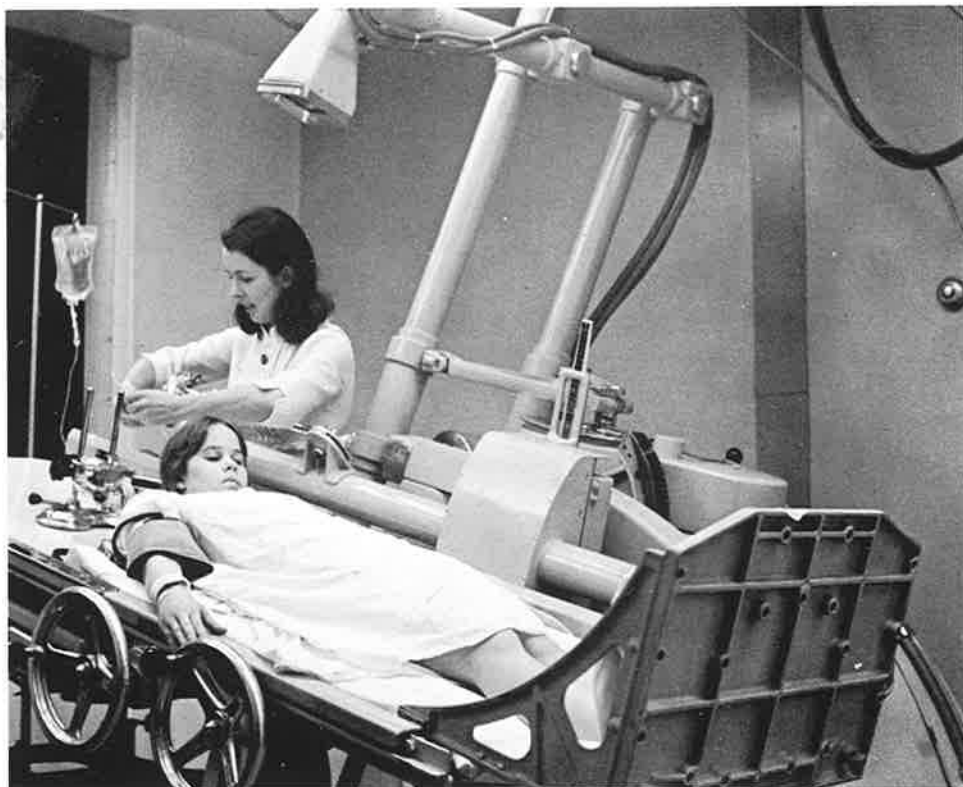
of the medical instruments. But most astonishing of all, the child's mouth opens and, through the wonders of modern technology, out comes a string of voices from Mercedes McCambridge's guttural devil through the whining accents of the Priest's mother, a series of languages including Greek, Latin, French, and gibberish, and, with terrifying effect, the wheezing and roaring growls of some huge monster beast. The power of these effects lies in the fact that we see and hear for ourselves, which is precisely dramatized in the confrontation between the mother, Chris MacNeil (played by Ellen Burstyn), and the doctors. In controlled voices of reason, they try to diagnose these terrifying phenomena as "pathological states" and "accelerated motor performance." Refusing to have her perceptions invalidated, the distraught mother cuts through their jargon, screaming, "What're you talking about? Jesus Christ! ... Did you see? Did you see?" Later, when a battery of doctors finally has to suggest exorcism, they try to lessen their discomfort with "rational" explanation: "It works only because the patient believes he's possessed ... purely by force of suggestion." Again Chris cuts through the verbal screen: "You're telling me that I should take my daughter to a witch doctor, is that it?"

The language of the film contrasts with the powerful visual and sound effects that confront us directly. Like the doctors, Blatty and Friedkin use language to attempt a symbolic inflation. Most of the characters names have obvious associations: Regan (Lear's daughter, the ungrateful child "sharper than a serpent's tooth"); Chris(t) MacNeil; Father Damien Karras (who is charitable like his namesake Saint Damian, but who ends up possessed by the demon); Burke ("to murder by suffocating, to suppress quietly"), who is murdered by Regan; Father Merrin (preserving ancient orthodoxy and ritual like the Maronite Catholics); Sharon (referred to as "Shar," who shares the horror); Lt. Kinderman (protector of children and childlike man); Father Dyer (who is dying inside, reborn through Damien's sacrifice). As Father Dyer walks down the street in the final scene, a sign reading "Prospect Avenue" appears over his shoulder. The gratuitous allusions to *Body and Soul* and *Othello* (as well as the name of the inner movie, *Crash Course*) are equally shallow and heavy-handed; they are probably introduced as "allegory" or because self-reflexiveness is currently chic. Blatty's script is full of banalities ("Mrs. MacNeil, the problem with your daughter is not her bed,

it's her brain.") In developing the film's anti-language position, director and screen-writer fail to solve an admittedly difficult problem—how to develop this negative attitude in language that does not also fail aesthetically. In contrast to these other techniques, they succeed with Father Merrin's silence. In the archeological dig in Northern Iraq, Father Merrin is the dominant figure and there is practically no dialogue. He's the archetypal silent man; we recognize him from genres like the Western, frequently starring Gary Cooper, Clint Eastwood, or Steve McQueen. Instead of talking, he acts. As Merrin says in the last line of the opening sequence: "There's something I must do." He is contrasted with Father Karras, whose wit and intellectuality manifest the devil's wicked tongue, which Karras has developed at "Harvard, Bellevue, Johns Hopkins, places like that." Chris MacNeil is even more blatantly linked to the devil through her incessant cursing and blaspheming ("Circumstances, my ass. He doesn't give a shit ... I've been on this fucking line for twenty minutes! Jesus Christ!") During the exorcism sequence, Father Merrin will not listen to Karras' "background" of the case, and he warns Damien to "avoid conversations with the demon ... the devil is a liar." Indeed, throughout the film, language is the devil's instrument, and Friedkin and Blatty succeed in developing his verbal prowess.

As the film denies the explanatory power of language, so are the conventional sources of emotional identification denied in character development. Pauline Kael points out: "We in the audience don't feel bad when the saintly Father Merrin dies; we don't even feel a pang of sympathy when the words 'Help Me' appear on Regan's body ... There is no indication that Blatty or Friedkin has any feeling for the little girl's helplessness and suffering, or her mother's." The basic situation and the tone of psychological realism provide the potential for strong sympathy, but Blatty and Friedkin choose not to develop it. They present us with data for a psychological interpretation (divorce, Regan's jealousy of Burke, the father's rejection of Regan, her forthcoming 13th birthday, unusual physical contact between mother and daughter); then they reject it in favor of a phenomenological devil. We don't care about Regan's terrible decline; our only reactions are curiosity and a delicious terror, for which we are carefully trained. Every time the camera goes upstairs and looks at Regan's doorway, we get turned on, anticipating the expensive horrors that will follow.

The Exorcist



The basic structure of the film is designed to draw us into the exorcism. Divided into three parts, the film's organization itself suggests a ritual pattern. (These segments roughly parallel three of Frye's phases of symbolism and modes of power, to be developed later.) The opening segment, set in Northern Iraq, presents us with phenomena that evade rational explanation, but are powerfully effective at another level. Framed by the opening and closing images of a sun glowing over an empty landscape (much like the sun image that dominates Anger's *Lucifer Rising*), the events at the archeological dig create an ominous tension, primarily through the way they are presented. The emphasis is on movement. The camera pans, zooms in and out, assumes odd positions, tracks with or against the movements of people; the film cuts abruptly between interior and exterior, close-up and long shot, light and dark; on the site and in the market place, the workers dig and hammer in a kind of unison, creating incantory rhythms. The sound track is dominated by a strange combination of powerful sounds that, despite their highly rhythmical quality, create a sense of confusion: religious chanting, the banging of the tools, the murmur of voices, the loud ticking clock, the rattling of the carriage, the snarling of the dogs, and intermittently throughout, the strange electronic music. The sense of mystery is heightened by the fact that much of the sparse dialogue is in a foreign language. The few fragments that we can understand take on a greater significance, which is inexplicable till later in the film: "Strange—not of the same period," "Evil against evil," "There is something I must do." We have a similar response to many of the visual images. Though at this point in the film, we don't yet understand their symbolic meaning, they still have the power to make us uneasy: eyes, both blind and staring; the circle images of the sun; the woman looking down menacingly from above; the strange amulet from another period; the demonic statue; the growling, fighting animals; Father Merrin's pillbox; and his near-death from the carriage. Finally, the development of mysterious significance grows more self-conscious at the end of this opening segment. With great purposefulness, Father Merrin returns to the dig. After a moment of danger before the Arab guards identify him, he climbs up to a high point where the huge demonic statue stands out in sharp relief against the orange sky. The camera examines its face and pulls back to a longer shot of the hilltop and strange things happen—the wind begins to blow and becomes the weird electronic music, rocks roll down the hill behind him, a mysterious old Arab watches intently, and suddenly two dogs begin a horrible growling fight. Finally the camera reveals Father Merrin positioned opposite the demonic statue with the great orange sun between them, foreshadowing their adversary relationship that is to dominate part three of the film.

Whereas the opening segment was developed through a phenomenological mode, emphasizing perception without interpretation, the second part shifts to a more familiar kind of melodrama that combines psychological realism and gothic horror (this mixture goes all the way back to *Caligari* and *Nosferatu*). In Frye's terms, the shift is from the ironic mode where images are presented directly through simple juxtaposition to the mimetic mode where they function as similes or analogies. This is the part of the film where we are teased with psychology, but the facile explanations characteristic of this mode are ultimately rejected. We are frightened not through direct apprehension of unexplained phenomena but through conscious manipulation of conventions from the horror film. Every film buff knows that noises in the attic and candles that blow out mysteriously cannot be explained by rats. As in most films of this genre, we are most surprised by our first look at the monster—our hero or heroine transformed by inspired make-up. Like the dreams in *Caligari*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *Hour of the Wolf*, Damien's dream develops two dimensions: the psychological realism of his guilt about his mother, and his supernatural awareness of images from the first



The Exorcist



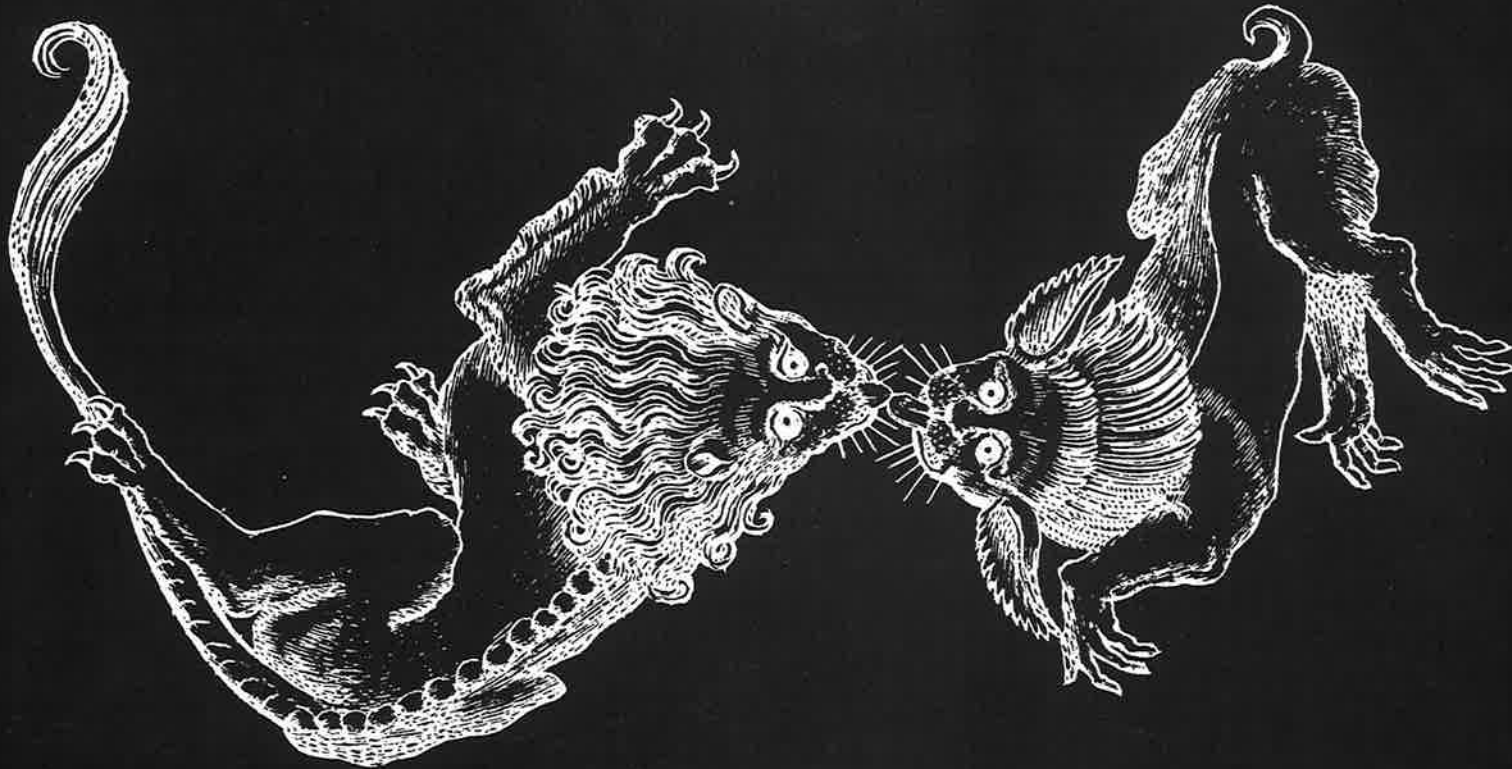
segment—the amulet, the black dog, and the time piece. When Regan is subjected to the spinal tap and x-rays, the huge clanking, flashing equipment is strongly reminiscent of Frankenstein's laboratory and various gothic torture instruments (more elaborate, but in the same mode as the medical torture tools in *The Devils*). In the same sequence, a needle inserted in her neck brings forth a stream of blood that must excite both Dracula and his fans.

This attack on science is part of a larger condemnation of sophisticated, decadent bourgeoisie culture (which we also remember from *Rosemary's Baby*). The second section begins with a dissolve from the powerful, primitive image at the dig to a bridge in the big city, establishing the context in which all the intractable modern evils are to be mechanically catalogued: poverty in the New York slums; sordid subways; overcrowded hospitals and asylums; loneliness of the old; casual acceptance of swearing, liquor, drugs,

and divorce; campus violence and the media that exploit it; a leftover "Nazi butchering pig" in Chris's kitchen. And at the center of the film lies the faithlessness and decadence of the "enlightened" clergy. Even Father Damien ("the best we have") has lost faith and wants to leave the Order. The decadence is epitomized by Father Dyer's vision of the heavenly city: "A solid white nightclub with me as headliner for all eternity, and they love me."

This modern world is explored by intercutting between two parallel plots. Chris MacNeil, a rich famous movie star, is having troubles with her two-faced daughter. Poor Father Damien is torn between loyalties to two mothers—the Church, and his earthly mother who is dying in poverty. The MacNeils' materialism and his spiritualism are both beset by soullessness and mental illness.

The last sequence creates a transition between parts two and three. Whereas part



two has formerly cut between the MacNeils and Father Damien (who are not united until part three), this final sequence cross-cuts between Lt. Kinderman and Chris MacNeil as they make parallel discoveries (e.g., she discovers the cross under Regan's pillow, he finds Regan's clay sculpture at the foot of the stairs) and unites them as they both tell lies (he pretends the autograph is for his daughter; she lies to prevent him from seeing Regan). In the end, they move toward the same conclusion. Friedkin complicates the inevitability with a bit of heavy-handed irony: the "facts" force Kinderman to conclude that Dennings was killed by "a very powerful man," while we in the audience watch Chris catching up with what we already know about Regan's guilt. Like Father Merrin and the demonic statue at the end of the first part, Kinderman and MacNeil are established as adversaries; in the secular urban context, good vs. evil has become cop vs. suspect. When Kinderman leaves, Chris runs to her daughter's room to find objects flying through the air, and Regan masturbating (or mutilating herself) with a bloody cross. Forcing Chris's head down between her legs, she screams: "Lick me, lick me!" When Regan 360's her head for the first time and sends the bureau after her mother, this is the turning point. We know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a psychological explanation is no longer possible.

Part three focuses on the exorcism. The shift from part two to three is not so abrupt as the move from Northern Iraq to Georgetown. We are not confronted with different characters in a new setting with a shift in style. Rather, we gain a different perspective on the same phenomena. In place of the psychological explanation from the mimetic part two, we now see through the eyes of Christian mythology. In Frye's terms, we have entered the mythic mode or anagogic phase where symbols represent identity and action takes the form of ritual. But instead of moving directly from irony to myth, which Frye describes as the characteristic pattern in twentieth century art, the film regresses backward through the mimetic mode in order to express its reactionary vision. Regan is no longer acting like a devil; she is the devil. When Father Damien takes communion, the traditional wafer is not to be interpreted as a symbol for Christ; it is Christ's body and wine is his blood. As viewers, we believe in the devil (and, by implication, in Christ) because of what we see and hear (for example, Regan's bed floats several feet above the ground). But, paradoxically, true faith requires rejection of our senses, as Father Mer-

rin warns Karras that the devil lies and creates illusions. The exorcism also brings together all the plot strands and creates apparent complexity for the sake of full resolution. Details of the first two parts (Merrin vs. the statue, the ominous carriage, the pills, the fighting dogs, the devil's tricks, the social corruption, etc.) develop their full meaning as they are shown to be part of the basic metaphysical dichotomy between good and evil, Christ and the devil.

Part three opens as Chris and Father Karras meet on a bridge (the same transitional image that opened part two). As she involves him in exorcising Regan, we realize that his plot line from part two (developing his guilt about his mother) provides him with a psychological handicap that makes him vulnerable to the devil. He is contrasted with Father Merrin, whose weakness is physical (old age, heart trouble). And with Father Merrin comes clarification of many ideas and images from part one. Into his wooded retreat comes a young priest (like the boy who carries the message at the dig) with a letter that Merrin simply puts in his pocket, as if he knows its contents full well. We begin to suspect that he left Iraq because he knew the devil was waiting for their next confrontation. Bringing back another technique not used since part one, the film dissolves from Father Merrin in the woods to the new face of his old adversary. Regan's distorted image takes over the whole screen in a huge close-up and defines Merrin's task. Her face dissolves into a classic gothic image—carrying a small black case, a black-clad stranger (Father Merrin) descends from a cab in the foggy night.

Even though it is clearly suggested that the Church has the power to unify all aspects of the experience and give them meaning, there is still a conflict between the old and new within the Order. Merrin relies on church ritual, whereas Father Karras' power lies in human interaction. Though we see him move toward renewal of faith during the exorcism, his psychological weaknesses do not allow him to use the traditional weapons. But when Chris asks him, "Is she gonna die?", he gains new determination, draws the devil into himself, and saves Regan through personal sacrifice. In this way, like Caligari, he takes on the triple identity of priest, psychiatrist, and demon.

The film's final shift takes place in the brief epilogue after the devil has been and gone. It opens with a cut to the stairs where Father Karras died. They are now empty, silent, revealing no trace of what has happened. As she prepares to drive away with her mother, Regan, who is said to remember nothing, suddenly stares at Father Dyer's collar and

reaches up to kiss him, showing that her unconscious knows for all time whence her help cometh. As he walks away, the camera pulls back for a "prospect" shot, suggesting that life will begin again with new knowledge of the devil, as earlier transitions foreshadowed events to come.

As Regan's bruises heal, we have a moment to reflect on the nature of this devil who is making so much money on the comeback trail. First of all, his powers are extremely limited, confined mostly to simple acts of levitation and teleportation. When he magically slides a drawer in and out of the bedtable, Karras tempts him to repeat his trick. He replies, in a parody of Christ at Gethsemane, that this would be "a vulgar display of power." But the point is, the devil *can't* transform the world through his own power, whereas Christ could but wouldn't. Instead, the devil must rely on his victims' weaknesses (Burke Dennings drank too much, Karras had psychological problems, Merrin was physically weak, and Regan had the vulnerability of the child, complicated by her incipient adolescence). The incident on which the novel is said to be based actually involved a boy, but the sex change also introduces the dimension of woman as the weaker vessel. (*Genesis* teaches that Satan gets to men through their emotional sympathies for the weaker sex; Regan, Chris, and Mother Karras all make demands on Damien and increase his vulnerability to the devil.) With his real power so limited, the devil must be frustrated. Stripped of all his glamor, he is extremely noisy, disgustingly messy, and unwholesomely concerned with sex. But even here, he is provincial. Far more limited than deSade or Burroughs, the worst insult he can fling at the priests is that they or their relatives commit acts of oral and anal sex. But the film grants him wide domain, implying that the Christian interpretation of the cosmic order is universally true. This devil has reared his head in Iraq, in Africa (where Father Merrin performed an exorcism some years ago), and in Washington D.C. He is real for Catholics (all the priests), atheists (Chris and family), and Jews (Lt. Kinderman). He also provides excellent grounds for anti-intellectuality in the Babel which characterizes science and the arts in this film (confirming the belief of many that this stuff is, indeed, the devil's work). He is presented as the cause of all the social ills catalogued earlier in the film. We do not have to solve (or even worry about) urban poverty, spiritual death, or corruption in the highest places. Instead, we are taught to fear all irreverence, unconventionality, rebellion, and complex sexuality.



The Exorcist



Don't Look Now takes a radical view of the supernatural. Instead of retreating to a Manichean vision of good and evil like *The Exorcist*, it challenges the basic polarities defined by our rational dualistic culture: life/death, present/future, sacred/profane, ordinary/bizarre, good/evil, true/false, real/imagined, normal/crazy. Like R. D. Laing, Carlos Castaneda, Norman O. Brown, and Doris Lessing, in this film Roeg accepts expanded consciousness and the powers of telepathy, suggesting (as in *Performance*) that, "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted." In *Don't Look Now* the hero finally accepts his second sight, but the delay insures misinterpretation and he forfeits his life. Roeg's style makes a similar demand on the audience to expand their vision, providing an implicit affirmation of non-ordinary reality as a source of power.

Based on the story by Daphne du Maurier, the film follows a modern couple, John (Donald Sutherland) and Laura Baxter (Julie Christie) to Venice after the death of their little daughter. In Venice they meet two middle-aged Scottish sisters, Wendy (played by Clelia Matania), who is dumpy and ordinary, and Heather (Hilary Mason), who is blind and psychic. These two women convey contradictory qualities which are held in tension throughout many aspects of the film; they appear mundane and ordinary, like the familiar British women who travel the continent, but, like the "wied sisters" in *Macbeth*, at the same time they convey a sense of ominous mystery, which is enhanced through multiple mirror images in our first encounter with them, and strengthened later through a sudden cut to the two sisters laughing wickedly. Heather claims to have established contact with the Baxters' dead daughter Christine, who is trying to warn her parents to leave Venice. She also affirms that John, too, has second sight.

John and Laura react very differently to their encounter with expanded reality. She is established in the opening scene as a seeker of new knowledge as she consults a book, *Beyond the Fragile Geometry of Space*, to answer her daughter's question: "If the world is round, why is the frozen pond flat?" John, who is about to have a clairvoyant flash, answers with the aphorism: "Nothing is what it seems." A few minutes later, in a slide of the interior of a cathedral that John is examining, a patch of red appears, which grows into a shape like a bloodstain. If we (and John) look closely, we can discern that this stain is growing out of a red, hooded cape worn by a small figure seated in the cathedral (who, at the end of the film, will become John's murderer). But John interprets only one aspect of the warning correctly; growing suddenly frightened, he rushes outside to find that his daughter, wearing her red mackintosh, has drowned in the pond. After the first encounter with the two sisters, Laura, who does not have a second sight, is convinced that Heather has actually made contact with Christine's spirit and is restored to health and vitality by this knowledge. Not yet having recognized his own powers, John is skeptical; yet he is impressed by Laura's improvement, which he can perceive in her face and voice. He offers a second aphorism, "Seeing is believing," which apparently contradicts his earlier assertion that "Nothing is what it seems." Later, when John and Laura get lost in the alleys of Venice, John has another clairvoyant experience in which he sees the red-coated figure and he hears a sigh and a scream. Laura sees nothing, but is frightened, though still dominated by curiosity: "What on earth was that?" John, the seer, denies his vision, claiming it's "A cat or a rat...maybe it was only my imagination." Leading her back to the main street, he reassures her: "It's okay. I found the real world." Thus John again ignores foreshadowings of his own death (the site and the murderer), interpreting his perceptions as unreal.

In the next encounter with the sisters, while Laura is eagerly trying to make contact with Christine, Heather tells her that John "Has the gift. That's why the child is trying to talk to him. Even if he doesn't know it. Even if he's rejecting it. It's a curse as well as a gift" (another important paradox in the



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film). As they are talking, the film cuts to John who almost falls while unveiling a gargoyle high on the church facade. The sequence evokes the previous church where the Baxters narrowly missed running into the sisters, and foreshadows John's fall in the cathedral, which is to occur soon after. After the seance, John and Laura again argue. She is convinced that the sisters are right in warning John that there is danger while they remain in Venice. John (who has been drinking) suddenly gets sick and must throw up. Ironically, upon his return, he tries to convince Laura that *she* is sick and she should resume taking her pills. Verbally, she accepts, and then hides the pills. When a phone call comes and they learn that their son has had an accident at his school, Laura interprets this as a validation of the prophecy: "This is it. They were right. You see." John facilitates her departure without accepting the supernatural interpretation.

But his skepticism begins to waver soon after when his scaffold breaks and he almost falls to his death in the cathedral. Afterwards, the Bishop remarks: "My father was killed in a fall," and John, badly shaken, replies: "It's unbelievable. My wife was warned that I was in danger." The Bishop confirms: "I wish I didn't have to believe in prophecy, but I do." The irony intensifies here as John moves toward belief, but grasps at this event as the whole truth, still denying that it is one more link in the chain connecting him with the red-hooded figure and Death in Venice. John is presented with these linking visions in the very next scene, where he chances upon the body of a murderer victim being raised from the canal against an out-of-focus red background. He immediately flashes back to his own fall and to the image of his daughter rising out of the pond. John now intends to leave Venice, but is prevented by his next clairvoyant experience. Laura, dressed in black, and the two sisters, pass by on a hearse boat with a casket, moving slowly down the Grand Canal. Again, as in the opening, he recognizes the danger, but interprets it partially, responding to its immediate shock, while failing to recognize that it is a vision of the future. Concluding that Laura (who is supposed to be in England with their son) has been kidnapped by the two sisters, he goes to the police. When he finally calls and finds that Laura is indeed safe in England, he and Laura reverse positions. He tries to explain his vision, while she is totally involved in the ordinary and mundane, confirming that he must meet her at the airport. Confronted with the fact that there is no "natural" explanation for his vision, he still refuses to acknowledge his second sight or the danger it implies. Instead, he shifts his attention to the sisters, focusing on his guilt over Heather's arrest. These feelings lead directly to his death. When he finally encounters the red-hooded figure in the dark Venice streets, he interprets her as a child in need, and moves in to help her, calling: "I'm a friend. I won't hurt you." Not until the dwarf turns on him and cuts his throat does he accept his second sight, which is revealed through the chain of images that passes before his eyes. This belated acceptance is made quite explicit in the Du Maurier story: "And he saw the vaporetto with Laura and the two sisters... and he knew why they were together and for what sad purpose they had come....and, 'Oh, God,' he thought, 'what a bloody silly way to die....'" Roeg adds a final scene emphasizing the contrast between John's resistance and Laura's acceptance. Recreating John's vision, the hearse vaporetto passes down the canal as Laura stands with a calm smile on her face, her eyes blank like Heather's; somehow her openness to another reality has given her the strength to accept John's death at least with resignation.

This contrast between Laura and John is important in establishing the film's attitude toward non-ordinary experience. Throughout, Laura has focused on concrete perceptions rather than abstractions or attitudes defined by the culture. For example, when asked whether she's a Christian, she replies: "I don't know. I'm kind to animals and children." She is open to explanations



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that contradict normal perceptions and beliefs. This helps her to accept the deaths of loved ones because in the world of the spirit, there is no rigid distinction between life and death. This transcendence is central to *Performance*, and to the vision of Borges, whose story "The South" was incorporated into the film. The main characters in *Walkabout* also hold contrasting views, but with the sex roles reversed; the sister is closed to new experience and expanded consciousness, while her younger brother is not, but the sister's influence prevails. The boy remains confounded by the Aborigines' death, and his return to "civilized" life implies that he will deny his extraordinary experiences on the outback.

Don't Look Now develops another important ambiguity concerning the nature of "the gift." Even if John had been able to accept his second sight, could he have escaped his death, which seems to have been ordained by fate? Does clairvoyance involve warnings of events that might not happen? Roeg intensifies this ambiguity by an emphasis on accidents that is not present in Du Maurier's story, where Christine dies of meningitis rather than drowning, and Johnnie is endangered by appendicitis rather than an injury in a game. Roeg invents the opening sequence of the drowning and the immediate reactions of the parents, enabling us to see in a concrete manner that this accident evokes clairvoyant foreshadowings (Du Maurier begins the story in the Venice restaurant). He also adds the parallel slow-motion falls of Laura in the restaurant and John in the cathedral. While hers can be explained in terms of her psychological condition and reaction to Heather's psychic powers, his remains unexplained except as the workings of fate.

Both accidents raise doubts about John and Laura's safety, yet it is John's that provides the true foreshadowing—the more ominous because without apparent cause. The accidents make the universe more dangerous and suggest a pattern of events that is inexorable, but only partially perceptible. In the restaurant before her fall, Laura says to John: "It's incredible. You can't change your course." If this is true, what is the value of the warnings? The film never resolves this question: it remains one of the many paradoxes that are offered in the place of the logical, either/or thinking of western culture.

Another of Roeg's significant additions is the development of John's occupation. In the story, the couple goes to Venice for a holiday, while in the film, their visit is motivated by John's restoration work. While Du Maurier also emphasizes the decadence of the Venice environment, her focus is on physical decay; "Venice is sinking. The whole city is dying." Robberies and murders are increasing. There are many gluttonous eating scenes that make the decadence wordly and material. The psychic moments are comically deflated when juxtaposed with the eating of spaghetti. But Roeg's treatment is entirely serious. As signs tell us throughout the film, "Venice is in peril." It seems a perfect visual metaphor for mysterious patterns of danger moving from the past into the future. After John's clairvoyant vision as the body is raised from the canal, he crosses the *Ponte de Miracolo* (Bridge of Miracles). Later, as he searches for the pensione, the camera reveals another sign, reading *Ponte de Vivante* (Bridge of the Living). The names suddenly attain symbolic significance, implying that the ancient city itself has supernatural powers that emerge at fated moments. Thus, Venice is not threatening to

those who cannot read the signs. As Heather tells John:

One of the things I love about Venice is that it's so safe for me to walk. The sounds... My sister hates it. She says it's like a city in aspic after a dinner party, and all the guests are dead. It frightens her... Milton loved this city.

Though sighted and aware of material dangers not perceived by blind prophets like Heather and Milton, John ignores the signs. His concern with restoring cathedrals allows Roeg to extend the decadence to art and religion—the world of the spirit—both of which are more closely connected with the supernatural. It also develops John's character by presenting his attachment to the traditional in art as well as in perception.

As in *The Exorcist*, the urban environment is important in developing themes of good and evil, energy and weakness, health and corruption, order and chaos. But Friedkin uses the modern city simply as a vehicle for mechanical enumeration of social and moral evils. In *Don't Look Now*, the Bishop and the police inspector, both representatives of institutions that sanctify order, are developed with considerable ambiguity. Both are immediately sensitive to John's extraordinary, disturbed state of mind, almost to the point of telepathic awareness. The police inspector probes insistently to discover John's hidden fear; during their conversation, the inspector glances casually out the window at the moment when the two sisters happen to walk by; as John talks on, the inspector doodles on the eyes in the police drawing of Heather, making it look more like her. The Bishop awakens suddenly at the moment of John's death. The connection between these public figures and the chain of supernatural events is also strengthened visually. The display of

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ecclesiastical costumes in the Bishop's chamber is set against a red background; the map of Venice in the inspector's office is shaped very much like the red stain on the slide in the opening sequence. Yet at the same time, these characters are subtly undermined. The police inspector holds weird theories about visual correspondences: "Age causes women to look more like each other... men grow quite distinct, but women seem to converge... the purpose of the police artist is to make the living appear dead." When Laura informs him that the drawing doesn't look like Heather, he replies: "It doesn't matter." The worldly Bishop makes Laura "feel uneasy." John explains: "It's because he makes God seem less than immaculate." After discussing mosaic tiles with the Bishop, John concludes: "He doesn't give an ecclesiastical fuck about churches." Thus, the police inspector's rationality is suspect, and we must question the breadth and purity of the Bishop's spiritual commitment.

The film's visual style confirms the existence of second sight. In contrast to *The Exorcist*, where ordinary and non-ordinary experience are presented in the same mode, making it easy for anyone to perceive them without struggle, *Don't Look Now* forces us to see in new ways and confront the problems of interpretation. Hence the audience is placed in the same situation as the characters. Visual and auditory images work phenomenologically, as in part one of *The Exorcist*. When image fragments constantly reappear, we look for the key in patterns and repetitions. We are confronted with photographs, drawings, portraits, slides, statues, and modern replicas of ancient mosaics; we are led into tracing their resemblances to each other and to the originals on which they are based. Thus, we acquire the habit of acute perception (which we may take out of the theater), since interpreting non-ordinary reality within the film is a matter of life and death.

The editing style destroys the linear structure of the literary source. The montage of quick shots juxtaposes present with past and future. The opening sequence has predictive value for the whole film. The first shot is of rain on the pond where Christine is soon to drown, establishing water imagery which is to permeate the film as it does the city of

Venice. This image is used with verbal irony when the wife of the Headmaster reassures John that his son is "right as rain." The second image is unrecognizable, but later when we see it in context—the Venice hotel room—we learn that it is light coming through a lattice window screen. In a series of quick cuts, several images become contaminated by association with Christine's death: her red mackintosh and red and white ball, fire imagery (to be repeated in the church candles), piano music (which recurs when John is looking for the pensione of the weird sisters), and John's howl and Laura's scream (which are associated with the screeching drill that follows immediately, the ambiguous sounds at the sisters' hotel that could be a baby crying or a cat howling, and with the strange whimperings of the dwarf). The image of breaking glass appears at least twice during this sequence, and recurs later in Laura's and John's falls. In the cathedral, a piece of wood smashes through the flimsy glass (reminding us of the book title, *Beyond the Fragile Geometry of Space*); like the unbroken surfaces of the bar window, the whiskey bottles and glasses, the mirrors, and the slide, this glass functions as a screen, a metaphor for the illusions that must be shattered in order to confront supernatural experience ("Nothing is what it seems"). The images in the slide establish the hooded dwarf, the cathedral, the color red, and the shape of the stain as signs of danger. At the end of the sequence, John rushes out to reclaim Christine's body from the pond while Laura (behind the window) and Johnny (his finger bloodied by broken glass) look on. The visual pairings of characters predict that the next victim will be John despite the apparent threats to Laura and Johnny. The film is framed with the deaths of Christine and John, fulfilling the prophecy of the opening; at the funeral, Laura and Johnny are reunited as spectators.

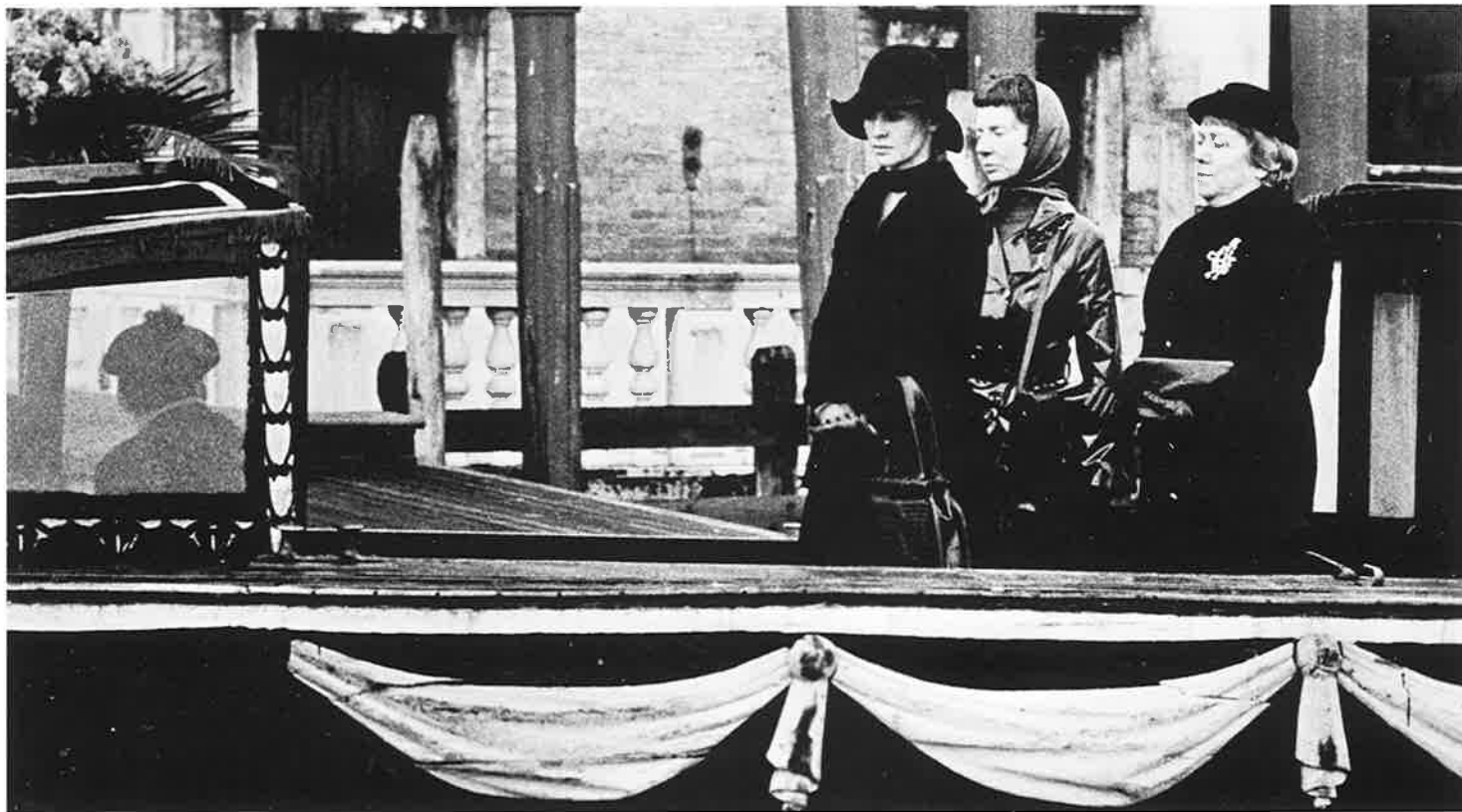
Frequently, when ordinary reality is transcended, a loop style is used to merge past, present, and future. In the ladies' room at the restaurant, we experience Heather's powers for the first time. The group of images is framed by close-ups of Heather's vacant blue eyes, which look like water. The next shot is of John's blue eyes, suggesting that he, too, has second sight. Then we see sparkling water, railings on a bridge, a close-up

of Laura driving away from the house in the rain with a sad look on her face (is this a flash backward to Chris's death, or forward to John's?) Next the camera pulls in to a shot of rain on watery ground before cutting back to Heather's eyes. Second sight provides Heather with a series of images just as Roeg provides them for us. She has to interpret what she sees, to realize the connections within the montage as we do. The first time we see the film, it's difficult to recognize the autonomy of this vision because rapid cutting characterizes the whole film; but the repetition of Heather's eyes becomes the key. As John lies dying, he sees a vision that integrates all the images from Heather's vision, some from the opening, and from other, non-linear sequences such as the love-making scene and the raising of the body from the canal. The convention of the dying man's life flashing before his eyes is given new significance through its association with clairvoyance and the supernatural.

John's vision of the vaporetto is unique. Presented in longer takes with little cutting, it creates a more conventional visual reality. Paradoxically, this clarity is confusing; we, like John, are tempted to interpret this as the present. Yet we have seen the pattern of the three women grouped together before, and usually juxtaposed with a child or an inanimate figure (this time, John's corpse). Thus we are taught to look for patterns, not only in the editing, but in visual and verbal elements within a single shot. In the church scene, as Laura describes Christine's death to the two sisters, we see the three women in the background with a statue in the foreground, before cutting to John struggling with a gargoyle whose face reminds us of the grotesque dwarf. In the next scene, when Laura goes to visit the sisters for a seance, Roeg intercuts between John seated before three bottles and the three women seated in the room, their heads in a row, as they try to contact the dead child. Over the mantle is a painting of three women with the Christ child. Later, when John discovers their pensione for the police, the camera dwells on this portrait, as if it is a key to the mystery. This pattern establishes Laura's identification with the two sisters, invalidating John's kidnaper theory; potentially, it also could have predicted his own danger. His misinterpretation

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is compounded because he has cut himself off from the incidents in which this pattern has previously appeared.

The lovemaking sequence rearranges linear reality, not to confound, but to affirm the experiential value of merging past, present, and future. At first, it seems that the lovemaking is the film's present, and is being intercut with flashes forward to dressing (Laura's black pants and silver top). Then as more time is spent on the later images, it seems that the dressing sequences are the present reality, intercut with flashes *back* to the lovemaking. We gradually learn that Roeg has controlled time to show the value of obscuring distinctions, and to emphasize the flow, as John and Laura's bodies move together in the lovemaking. In this sequence the content is part of everyday reality, rather than the extremes of death or second sight. The banal and the extraordinary are also merged as the action is initiated by the most mundane of details. Laura says: "You have toothpaste on your mouth," and John replies: "Eat it off." The intense lovemaking (characterized by energy, creative variety, and full, active commitment by both Laura and John) is intercut with shots of them sharing the bathroom as they get dressed. Laura puts on mascara; John winds his watch and fixes a drink. The cutting suggests that it is possible to go from the most intense to the most mundane smoothly, and without emotional loss. Some of the images stress the carry-over of warmth as Laura looks in the mirror admiring her own sensuality and repeating the gestures she used in making love. As they walk through the hotel lobby, glamorously dressed for the evening, Laura puts her hand on John's arm, and leans her head on his shoulder affectionately. Their glowing vitality contrasts with the sterility of the shrouded hotel furniture, which signals that Venice is about to close down for the winter. In contrast to *The Exorcist*, which treats sex as a manifestation of decadence and evil, Roeg's film elevates it to an act of regeneration. It is a rite of passage signalling the end of the couple's mourning for their daughter, and Laura's return to full participation in life.

The success of this sequence grows out of the fact that content and style are combined with an equal power that is unusual for the film. Generally speaking, *Don't Look Now* succeeds primarily at the perceptual level; its emotional impact is considerably weaker. This limitation is most apparent in John's murder. Despite the vivid horror of

the blood and the twitching, the seriousness of Roeg's tone is undermined by the fact that John's been done in by a killer dwarf ("What a bloody silly way to die"). Despite all the visual preparation, the instrument of his death appears like a *deus ex machina*; one cannot go through life worrying about being killed by a grotesque dwarf. In some ways, of course, the dwarf is associated with Christine, primarily through size, shape and color. However, this association only heightens the abstraction with which the child's death is handled. As in *The Exorcist*, Christine and the demon become polarities of good and evil, victim and killer, but here the emphasis is on fusion, which obscures the traditional distinction. Though our perceptual skills are advanced and we may become more open intellectually to non-ordinary experience, *Don't Look Now*, unlike *Performance* and *Walkabout*, does not touch our deepest fantasies and needs. Further, the supernatural experiences of the film are not linked to growth toward positive ends, but to acceptance of a declining world and sudden death.

All three films by Roeg are framed by two deaths, the first sending the protagonist off to a new world where he encounters an expanded reality; his response to that experience is expressed in the final death. In *Performance*, Chas, a small-time hood, murders his pal Joey, a figure from his childhood whom he has both loved and hated. The conventional gangster framework leads us to interpret this killing as a simple act of revenge, but the strange non-linear editing with flashes forward to Turner (Jagger) suggests deeper symbolic implications. When Chas flees from this crime, his mythic journey takes him to the underground where he hides in Turner's basement and becomes his demon. The film undergoes a similar transformation, merging genres, past, present and future, sexual identities, and creating a visionary reality where all experience is one. Chas's final performance—the killing of Turner—becomes an act of love, which insures their total fusion.

In the opening of *Walkabout*, a man carrying his briefcase drives out to the barren plain and, after trying unsuccessfully to murder his two children, commits suicide by setting fire to his car. These unexplained events, preceded by a city montage and presented through leaps of time and space, transcend their particular qualities and evoke all acts of self-destruction committed by creatures of a desperate civilization. Thus when the

children are alone on the outback, they take on the symbolic identity of *all* persons who are forced into a new experiential reality. A shift occurs from dark irony to a romantic visual surface. But the visual affirmation is undermined when the children begin to commit acts of self-destruction by denying their own experience, forcing another person (the Aborigine boy) into a new reality, which he finds intolerable; he destroys himself. What will the children do when they're as old as their father? The chain goes on forever, confirming the archetypal reasonance that is established in the film's style.

In *Performance* and *Walkabout* the final victim is a figure who (both on and off the screen) embodies the beauty and sexual power of the non-rational—the Aborigine prince David Gumpilil, and the satanic rock star Mick Jagger. In the visionary mode of *Performance*, acceptance of new experience allows Chas and Turner to transcend death. In *Walkabout*, the symbolic expansion forces us to take responsibility for destroying self and others if we fail at this acceptance. Both the earlier films introduce an element of ecstasy. In *Performance* it is carried by Jagger's performing powers and the final moment of triumphant unity. In *Walkabout* it is embodied in the grace and harmony of planet; his death only heightens our awareness of these values. In *Don't Look Now*, helplessness replaces ecstasy; death is marked by the absurd, and Laura's acceptance provides only the ability to bear her loss. Shifting from the visionary and symbolic modes of the earlier films, which lead to profound reevaluation of symbolic experience, *Don't Look Now* offers a realism that is far more commercially accessible. It enables Roeg to use competent professionals like Sutherland and Christie, who are credible and appealing, but who lack the magic of Jagger and Gumpilil and the mysterious evocative power of the anonymous children. The fascination of the surface is the film's primary source of value. Involvement in human experience focuses on exploration of formal patterns which may, indeed, be unchangeable, no matter how much is known about them. Both *The Exorcist* and *Don't Look Now*, in trying to affirm a basic metaphysical value and expand our spiritual reality in a world dominated by corruption and despair, draw our attention to the surface and remain uninvolved at the level of basic conception and emotional power. ★

COSTA GAVRAS:
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FILMOGRAPHY

STATE OF SIEGE

