

# *Cinema of the Occult*

*New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film*



*Carrol L. Fry*

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## 1

## Introduction: “A Sound Magician Is a Mighty God”: The Occult in Western Civilization

FEW TOPICS FOR ANY SOCIETY ARE MORE POLARIZED AND POLARIZING than religion. Surely it is a tribute to our multicultural nation that we have been able to disagree peacefully, if not always pleasantly or even politely, on matters of faith or the lack thereof. Today we see a wide range of spiritual paths in the Western World, many well outside the Judeo/Christian tradition. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity in its various incarnations with a minority of Judaism dominated the spiritual life of the West, though interpretations of Jesus’ words could differ greatly and Jews were frequently the objects of persecution by Christians.

Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), however, changed everything. If Darwin’s theory of evolution is correct, scientists of the day insisted, humanity was not the handiwork of God but just one more species that evolved through the accidental patterns of whimsical nature with survival of the fittest and natural selection being the true creative force. The divine seemed to have no place in this scheme of things, and *Origin* caused a case of spiritual indigestion for many. Darwin and his enthusiastic followers sparked an often acrimonious debate that is still with us 150 years after the publication of *Origin*.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity rejected Darwin’s theory throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, and evangelical Christians continue to do so today. The Southern Baptist Convention Web site, for instance, affirms that “all scripture is totally true and trustworthy”;<sup>2</sup> and Southern Baptists, along with other conservative Christian denominations, affirm the Genesis version of creation, placing the age of the earth at about 6,000 years. At the other extreme in discussions of faith, best-selling writers such as Sam Harris label all religion pernicious and proclaim *The End of Faith* (his title), while post-Darwinian Richard Dawkins, whom we might call a quite evangelistic atheist, writes, “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended

*process of gradual evolution* [italics his]. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion.”<sup>3</sup> Polls show a rich mix of diversity in American society on the issue of creation versus evolution. The General Social Survey from 2004 found that a majority of Americans, 55.2 percent, believe that evolutionary theory is not true while 44.7 percent believe it is true or probably true.<sup>4</sup> These figures reflect the polarities of American faith.

Belief in the literal truth of the Bible and atheism are opposite extremes in the national discourse on religion. The fact that 390,000 million people wrote “Jedi” in the religious preference block on a 2001 census, however, offers but one small indication of disillusionment with the easy answers in matters of religion from either side.<sup>5</sup> Data from religious surveys confirms these ambiguities. While most of those who responded to the American National Election Survey reported themselves at least “spiritual” and 77 percent consider religion to be an important part of their lives, 41.2 percent report attending church no more than once a month or less.<sup>6</sup> In a survey of Christian denominations, 16 percent classified themselves as “other” or “none.”<sup>7</sup>

A goodly part of those classified in the latter category are among the millions of people who have totally opted out of traditional Christianity and Judaism to follow alternative spiritual paths called New Religious Movements, acronymed NRMs by scholars in the field. NRMs are a powerful but little noticed result of the movement away from organized Christianity. They include world religions that are hardly new but are at least new to the United States, brought by the waves of immigration following World War II. Some have migrated here in their pristine forms, such as the Baha’i Faith, Islam, and the wide range of Buddhist and Hindu paths. Others are hybrids of these established religions, such as the Nation of Islam. I learned a great deal about NRMs when I produced a series of documentaries for public radio on new religious movements called *Creeds in Conflict* (released in 1988). In producing and scripting *Creeds in Conflict*, I interviewed many followers of NRMs.

A significant number of these religious paths can only be categorized under the heading of occult.<sup>8</sup> I found myself most interested in these, because of those that I researched only the occult connects to my lifelong fascination with film. Other NRMs are simply too ascetic for the arts in an American ambience. From the earliest days of the medium, the sensational nature of the occult has inspired writers and directors for films such as George Méliès’ *The Devil’s Manor* (1896), *The Devil in a Convent* (1899), Stellan Rye’s *The Student of Prague*

(1913), and Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920). These films meet the definition of occult only in the most general terms—the portrayal of supernatural events as opposed to religious practices. In the past fifty years, however, as occult religions have proliferated and knowledge of them has bubbled into the popular imagination, Wicca, Spiritualism, Satanism, and various New Age beliefs have been mined by scriptwriters. These films reflect society's fundamental reaction to the occult. Many find the promise of transcendent experience from the occult attractive, and even those who find it frightening and perhaps threatening are still interested in it enough to make it an enduring genre of film and literature.

Before applying the term *occult* to films we should determine just what the word means. We should first understand that for those who follow the occult paths we see portrayed in film, the occult is not just a matter of fiction. These are religious paths that have attracted millions of people. Professor Robert Ellwood's definition is scholarly, cogent, and representative. Occult religions are "those whose adherents believe they are custodians of significant truth about reality—truth unknown to most people either because it has been deliberately concealed or because it is by its very nature unknowable without special training or initiation."<sup>9</sup> Definitions at the popular level are little different. New Age guru John Lash writes, "Fundamentally and exactly, it [the word *occult*] refers to the practice (ism) of *cultivating* hidden forces."<sup>10</sup> In *Out on a Limb*, New Age pop maven Shirley MacLaine quotes her friend David's definition of the occult: "Well, it means 'hidden.' So just because something is hidden doesn't mean it's not there."<sup>11</sup> Most definitions of the occult use either the word "hidden" or cognates and assume the necessity for some kind of special training or special gift in order to perceive or practice it. The assumption is that a veil separates the world that most of us experience from hidden realities. But one wag, writing for the December 1976 edition of the *Journal of Electronic Engineers*, sums up the view of doubters: "This is the kind of thing I wouldn't believe even if it were true."

Occult practice dates to the most ancient times. The hermetic tradition, named for the "thrice great Hermes," goes back to ancient Egypt. In Egyptian myth, Thoth, or Hermes, is God of literature and knowledge, and he served as scribe for the gods. The name was then applied to stories of a great mystic and adept in the occult, Hermes Trismigistus. Ancient folk tradition abounds with stories of this magician and wise man and of the forty-two books<sup>12</sup> he was said to have written, a compendium of the occult lore of the ancient world. Apparently such books may indeed have existed, but scholars suspect they were authored by several individuals. According to legend, the

books were burned with the destruction of the great library at Alexandria, but fragments survive. The term *hermetic* lived on to describe works written from pre-Christian times to the present as a general description of occult practices.

The ancient Jewish *Kabala* (the word gets various spellings as transliterated from Hebrew) has been another locus of occult study. In Hebrew, the word *Kabala* means “documents received from tradition” and not included in what came to be the Jewish Bible, or the Old Testament to Christians, a definition whose simplicity belies the occult significance that came to be attached to the work. The *Kabala* describes the nature of God and the creation of various worlds through the *Sefirot*, emanations from the divine. Later, scholars during the Reformation discovered the work and began to find occult significance in hidden meanings that they found in arrangements of words and numerical equivalents of letters. The *Kabala* remains of interest to occultists in the present day.

Occult lore and the tradition of alchemy that grew from it were a powerful force in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, despite the power and authority of the Roman church. The period is rife with treatises on magic. Famed magician and alchemist Cornelius Agrippa wrote in the fifteenth century, “Magic is a faculty of wonderful virtue, full of most high mysteries, containing the most high contemplation of most secret things, together with the nature, power, quality, substance and virtues thereof.”<sup>13</sup> The hero in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* expresses the Renaissance fascination with magic and the occult, though Faust must later rue his choice, when he cries,

Oh what a world of profit and delight  
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence,  
Is promised to the studious artisan . . .  
A sound magician is a mighty god.<sup>14</sup>

A long-lived occult movement was born in 1614 when the pamphlet *Fama Fraternitatus* appeared in Tübingen in the Germanys, claiming to be the story of Christian Rosencreutz (translated “rosy cross”), purportedly born in 1378.<sup>15</sup> According to this document, Rosencreutz traveled to the East where he met the great masters of the occult and translated a mysterious *Book M*, which contained the secrets of the universe. He then gathered a group of twelve disciples to carry on his work, the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, each to replace himself when he neared death. Their work was healing, using the hidden secrets of nature. The *Fama* is ardently anti-Catholic, a

product of the Reformation; and a group of Lutherans claimed to have fabricated the book. The ideas it espouses caught on, however, inspiring Rosicrucian lodges, or "invisible brotherhoods," throughout Europe, especially in the late eighteenth century when they flourished in the intellectual soup from which the French Revolution grew and apparently cross-fertilized with the emerging Masonic lodges from that time.

Occultism also prospered in the seemingly unlikely environment of nineteenth-century England, perhaps spurred by the crisis in Christian faith brought about by the conflict of science and religion, a conflict that inspired a search for alternate spirituality. Many prominent Victorians, including literary figures William Butler Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, H. Ryder Haggard, and perhaps Abraham Stoker (of *Dracula* fame) were members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn Society, an organization devoted to exploration of occult paths. Their history is obscure,<sup>16</sup> but some members were affiliated with Rosicrucian lodges and those Freemason groups interested in the occult. Other eminent Victorians fascinated with the occult include Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and prolific novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton, claimed by his son to have been a member of a Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Yet another episode in the history of the occult began in 1840s' New England from the seemingly innocent beginnings of a kitchen table rapping, caused, said the soon-to-be-famous Fox sisters who lived there, by spirits from the beyond anxious to speak to the living. Communication with the dead was no new claim. Emanuel Swedenborg in the eighteenth century wrote of his conversations with spirits and also with angels, attracting many followers; and his writings led to the creation of the Swedenborgian church, which continues into the present. But the Fox sisters and the stir that they created led to the popularity of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century, with famous mediums conducting séances in Europe, England, and America, and eventually to the formation of organized Spiritualist churches.

Toward the end of the Victorian period, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Polish immigrant to England, spearheaded the establishment of the Theosophical Society. Her ideas were drawn from Buddhist and Hindu mysticism as well as *The Kabala*. In her books *Isis Unveiled* (1888) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1897), Blavatsky tells of "a great white brotherhood" of mahatmas living in different parts of the world who were in telepathic communication and had headquarters in Tibet. She claimed psychic communication with them as well as letters. These mahatmas dwell, she writes, simultaneously in the natural and spiritual world and serve mankind. The teachings from the



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**Madame Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy. Picture courtesy of the Theosophical Society of America.**

weighty tomes she wrote focus on this white brotherhood and on versions of reincarnation and karma from Eastern mysticism.

In 1921, Margaret Murray published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, a book in which she argued that a religion existed in pre-Christian Europe that focused on worship of male and female deities with special reverence for a Goddess. In this and other books, Murray claimed that the Church's Inquisition stamped out this religion, demonizing and executing the priestesses and priests as witches. In 1954, Gerald Gardner followed Murray's work with *Witchcraft Today*, in which he claimed to have discovered a coven of hereditary witches in England who had practiced an occult religion such as that Murray had described in a tradition that dated to the seventeenth century. His works inspired others to form covens, practicing the rituals described in his *Book of Shadows* in a religion that has come to be called Neo Paganism, or Wicca.

These are just a few of the multitudinous paths of the occult through history. I chose to mention them here because they, like many others, continue to attract followers today, as a cursory browse of the World Wide Web reveals. Rosicrucianism thrives, with the society operating out of plush headquarters in Santa Clara, California. Modern versions of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn Society publish Web sites that tout their work in esotericism and the arcane. Spiritualist churches dot the landscape, under the aegis of two national organizations in the United States and one international organization. Satanism is still with us in organized groups like the Temple of Set and the Church of Satan and possibly in sub-rosa covens. Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society has chapters in most major cities and many smaller ones as well. Moreover, Neo Paganism in various forms, especially Wicca, is on the fast track as a growth religion. The driving force behind all of this spiritual seeking might be traced to the dawning of the New Age, which has proliferated and revitalized occult paths in the second half of the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century.

Among the typologies created by film critics, those that deal with the occult are usually labeled either horror or fantasy. Actually the terms overlap, as the majority of horror films loosely meet the definition of fantasy: that is, they portray incidents that could not happen in the world as we know it. Michael or Jason, from the *Halloween* or *Friday the Thirteenth* franchises, should not walk away for another sequel after being riddled with bullets. Nor do we have scientific evidence of real vampires, werewolves, or walking mummies. Writers of good fantasy, be it in film or fiction as opposed to the B slasher movies, use a *frame of reference* for their plots: that is, a *device for making*

*the implausible seem plausible*, at least while we're in the theater or reading the book, and persuading the viewer or reader to suspend disbelief. The old Gypsy woman in *The Wolf Man* (1941) frames the werewolf film in her revelation to poor Larry Talbot: "Even a man who is pure at heart and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright": those who are bitten by a werewolf will develop fur, fangs, and a nasty disposition in the full moon, and only a silver bullet can kill them.

These premises give at least temporary plausibility to obviously implausible events. Tudorov describes fantasy in similar terms. When we experience the fantastic in literature or film, he writes, the moment of hesitation over whether "the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place" brings the brief suspension of disbelief. "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event."<sup>17</sup>

So it goes in the occult film. Occult paths—from New Age beliefs on karma or spirit guides, to Spiritualism, to Wicca, to Satanism, and to other occult systems less well known—furnish a frame of reference for the viewer's suspension of disbelief. The portrayal of the occult path is often inexact, usually an extrapolation of its potential to establish sensational plots rather than a totally correct representation. But the premises of the occult belief system on which the film is based frame the plot. A few specialized narrative devices appear in these films. Most include a cautionary tale element: either a suggestion that the occult practice is dangerous or an outright moral lesson to that effect, perhaps a reflection of filmmakers' perception of audience nervousness about the occult. Another common device is the doubter or scoffer, who disbelieves in the occult path that is the subject of the film and has to be convinced. The purpose of this character is to lead the audience to temporary suspension of disbelief. The doubter represents the reader or viewer, and as Tudorov writes, "The reader's [or viewer's] role is so to speak entrusted to a character . . . , and the actual reader [or viewer] identifies himself with the character"<sup>18</sup> in gradually, and temporarily, accepting the existence of the supernatural. Often the doubter character provides the equivalent of the limited omniscient point of view in fiction. Another common element of the occult film is a lecture from one of the characters that establishes the occult frame of reference.

One need look no further for a preliminary example of a successful film adaptation of the occult than the collaboration of director Steven Spielberg and producer/writer George Lucas in the *Indiana Jones* films,<sup>19</sup> especially the first and third of the series. Both films not only

adapt the occult as framing device but allude to important historical attempts in Germany to harness arcane practices. The rise of National Socialism, the Nazi Party, in Germany during the 1930s is surely one of the most pivotal events of the past one hundred years, and the quest for occult power was an important goal for many powerful Nazis. The story of that quest is such a good one that Lucas and Spielberg used it, admittedly in rather haphazard fashion, in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). But a short history lesson is necessary to show how they adapt real incidents and what amounts to legend about the Nazi occult to frame the scripts.

The Nazi belief in the occult is a long and tangled story. Historians trace the roots of this fascination to the *völkisch* movement in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, a nostalgic—and racist—look back at a distant past when Germanic tribes worshiped pagan gods in what were imagined as agrarian utopias. In the early years of the twentieth century, Guido von List (1848–1919) and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954) wrote and lectured voluminously on the existence of an ancient Aryan race of Nordic god-men whose bloodline had been corrupted by their sexual contact with “ape men”—inferior species that degraded the Nordic racial purity. List, Liebenfels, and other writers fed the undercurrent of general racism and anti-Semitism endemic to German society at that time.

Their writings were inspired in part by a perverse interpretation of books by Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, who had written of the great white masters with whom she claimed to have communicated, remnants of an earlier race with occult powers, in *Isis Unveiled*. Madame Blavatsky would have been appalled at the adaptation of her work, but it was but a short leap from Theosophy for von List, von Liebenfels, Otto Rahn, Karl Maria Wiligut (who claimed to have a racial memory of 200,000 years of Aryan history), and others to associate “white masters” with their racist philosophy and to also believe that they existed and could be contacted. All wanted desperately to find Thule, the home of the Aryan god-men they ardently believed to be their ancestors, thought variously to be Iceland, the Himalayas, or even the center of the earth. Thule would provide evidence for their claims as well as occult power. Gnosticism in its final development as Manichaeism, with its juxtaposition of forces of light and darkness (which the *völkisch* writers reinterpreted to mean light-skinned and dark-skinned peoples) as incorrectly refracted from Theosophist writing, played its part in their belief in Aryan superiority.

Most of these early ariosophists, as those who studied Aryanism were called, were of a philosophical mind, not men of action. But their racist doctrines gained political capital after the 1918 Armistice end-

ing World War I and the economic disaster that befell Germany following the peace settlement, blamed by many on the Jewish community. The economy was in shambles, and Communist forces established a separate government in Bavaria in 1919. Rudolph von Sebottendorff, a student of the occult and prolific writer, had earlier organized the Thule Society, an occultist group influenced by List, Liebenfels, and other ariosophists who hoped to find Thule. Their aristocratic and rightist sensibilities were appalled at the Communist threat. The Thule Society stockpiled weapons and was instrumental in raising an army to evict the Communists from Bavaria. From the Thule Society, primarily a group of upper middle class and wealthy men, came the DAP, or German Worker's Party, in what seems to have been a rather condescending reaching out by the well-to-do to bring the pagan occult to the working classes. The DAP eventually morphed into the NSDAP, or National Socialist German Worker's Party, which was soon dominated by the charismatic Adolph Hitler; and the rest, as they say, is history.<sup>20</sup>

Just whether Hitler ever had much interest in the occult is a matter of conjecture. Opinions vary and sensational exposés abound, in which fact melds with legend. Ravenscroft spins a rousing account of a Hitler who was fixated on the occult power of the so-called Spear of Destiny or Spear of Longinus, the iron spearhead that was said to have pierced the side of Christ on the cross and was thought to have occult power. Hitler first saw the spear in the Vienna Hofmuseum, Ravenscroft writes, and later acquired it when Germany took over Austria in 1938.<sup>21</sup> Ravenscroft also asserts that Hitler was possessed by a "Lucerific principality."<sup>22</sup> Pauwels and Bergier describe a Hitler who was immoderately attached to an occultist and astrologer named Horbiger and quote Hitler as rejecting "Judeo-liberal science" and embracing "Nordic science," which, they assert, was "derived from the same source as the whole esoteric movement."<sup>23</sup>

Goodrick-Clarke, on the other hand, finds little connection between Hitler and the occult groups that proliferated in Germany following the defeat in World War I. He does, however, note that Hitler had access to the writings of Liebenfels and others of his ilk and that he accepted the Gnostic/Manichaeian version of the struggle between forces of light and darkness as referring to light/dark-skinned humanity. It became the basis of his racist doctrines and extermination policies, as he turned *Germanorden* theories about hidden white masters to his aggressive doctrine of Aryan supremacy.<sup>24</sup>

This is but a thumbnail sketch of little-known events that contributed to the cataclysm of World War II. In addition to the relatively proven facts of the period in the more scholarly works, such as Goo-

drick-Clarke's book, a great body of what is best described as legend has grown up about the Nazi occult, all of it quite sensational. From this mix of historically documented fact with oral tradition about the Nazis, along with a dash of biblical allusion, can come the frame for film plots, specifically for the first and third of the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, both of which were megahits and both of which are loosely framed by the Nazi occult.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Professor Jones (Harrison Ford) gets a visit from Army Intelligence after his debacle in Central America, and one of the agents quickly introduces the topic of the occult, greeting Indiana as: "Indiana Jones, professor of archeology, expert on the occult, and, how does one say it? Obtainer of rare antiquities." The agent then gives Jones his mission to find the Ark of the Covenant, the receptacle for the tablets that Moses received from God, as well as, in some traditions, the staff of Aaron and a container of manna. The Ark, he says, has occult power as it is described in the Bible, and the Germans want to harness that power. "For the last two years," the agent tells Jones, "the Nazis have had teams of archeologists running around the world looking for all kinds of religious artifacts. Hitler's a nut on the subject. He's crazy. He's obsessed with the occult."

Many scholarly discussions of the Nazi occult, as opposed to sensational accounts of oral tradition, would beg to differ. If Hitler viewed such stuff as nonsense, however, *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, head of the dreaded SS, did not. The twin lightning flashes on the SS uniform are actually runes from Teutonic prehistory. The *völkisch* revival and the German occult tradition that sprang from it had long been fixated on these runes as remnants of an idealized Aryan past. A devoted occultist and patron of scholars of the arcane, Himmler authorized expeditions to sites around the world to find evidence of the Aryan god-men, past or present.

Thus, it is no accident in *The Lost Ark* that Professor Jones goes to the Himalayas to find Marion and the crystal headpiece which, when mounted on a staff in the Egyptian chamber, would lead to knowledge of the Ark's whereabouts. Heinrich Himmler had sent teams to Tibet, first in 1934–36 and then in 1938–39.<sup>25</sup> Theosophist Helena Blavatsky had placed the headquarters of white masters in Tibet, and her works were misapplied as one plot in the seed ground for German occultism. The Ark that the film's Nazis so ardently seek does indeed have arcane power as variously described in the Bible and as it comes up in tales of the occult. In the film, Belloq, the Nazi hired-gun archeologist, says of the Ark, "It's a transmitter! It's a radio for speaking to God."

The source of Belloq's assertion comes from Exodus, in which God communicates with Moses through the Ark.<sup>26</sup> In Joshua, the river Jordan dries up when priests carrying the Ark step into it, allowing the army to pass, and then the walls of Jericho fall after the priests carry it around the city (chapters 4 and 5). Also in 1 Samuel, the Ark, after being captured by the Philistines, brings its captors great trouble (even causing a statue of their god Dagon to tumble before it), then aids the chosen people in a battle to drive invaders from their land (chapters 5 and 6). Hence, Marcus can say, "The army that carries the ark before it is invincible."

Were there actually Nazi attempts to find the Ark? The various digs around sites where rumors from the Middle Ages alleged that it and the Holy Grail might be hidden suggest that German occult groups such as the Order of the New Templars as well as Himmler and other Nazi officials were more than a little excited about finding it. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is a bit of crowd-pleasing escapism set in a 1930s' ambience; but Lucas, as originator of the story, does use actual history and legend, as well as biblical references, in framing his tale about Nazi attempts to harness occult power for their purposes.

The second film of the Indiana Jones saga, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), has a different occult theme. The plot focuses on the Thugee, an Indian cult of assassins that dates back to at least the seventh century CE. The Thugee were devotees of the goddess Kali, figured as a four-armed female form and the devourer of time. Their murders were sacrifices to her, and they gave one third of the wealth they took from victims to her.<sup>27</sup> The Thugee were wiped out by the British in the eighteenth century, and *Temple of Doom* plays fast and loose with what little is known of them, making them the villains of the piece. The occult element, of course, lies in the power of the stones that the Thugee priest tries to harness for his purposes, but this part of the plot is a fabrication rather than an element of Hindu tradition.<sup>28</sup>

In the third and maybe final Indiana Jones adventure he returns to the Nazis and another holy object said to have occult power and to have been greatly desired by German occultists. This time, the Holy Grail frames the plot. Its story is a central part of Western literature and myth. The Grail takes different forms in these stories. In most, it is the cup that Christ and his disciples used at the Last Supper and that Joseph of Arimathea used to catch Christ's blood at the crucifixion. The twelfth-century *Percival* of Chrétien de Troyes is an early version; and Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century *Parzifal*, a work much studied by German occultists, follows. In von Eschenbach's work, the Grail is a stone. In Thomas Malory's fifteenth-

century *Morte d'Arthur* and Alfred Tennyson's nineteenth-century poetic adaptation of Malory's work, *Idylls of the King*, the Grail is again a cup. According to some legends, this cup was brought by Joseph of Arimathea to England, where it disappeared. There are many other versions of the story and possible locations of the Grail, some of the most sensational of which involved the fabled Knights Templar, an enormously wealthy order of medieval knights who were supposedly wiped out during a purge in 1307 staged by the French king Philip IV and Pope Clement V. Countless tales have been woven about the Templars as custodians of occult power and perhaps even of the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant.

The lore of the Grail, then, has inspired many works of literature and much speculation, including most recently *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Templar Revelation*. These writers suggest that the Grail is really Mary Magdalene, who, the authors say, was the wife of Jesus and bore his child, a bloodline protected by first the Cathars, or Albigensians, a Christian heresy wiped out in a papal genocide in 1209, then by the Templars, and from the fourteenth century to the present by the shadowy Priory of Sion. The immensely popular Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code* is indebted to these and other recent works on the Grail. But suffice it here to say that many members of the Thule Society, the German Order Walvater of the Holy Grail (or *Germanorden*), and other racist occult groups in the early twentieth century, as well as Himmler in the 1930s, translated the Grail concept to mean "pure blood," an approach that fit their worldview of a pristine Aryan bloodline. The Grail legends inspired a good deal of digging around the many Templar castles and Templar-built cathedrals.

Otto Rahn introduced the Grail concept to Himmler. Rahn, as well as most other of the *Germanorden*, admired *Parzifal*, which, he was convinced, reflected much of the beliefs of the Cathars. Their doctrines and the events of that time are rife with legend. They may have believed, as Gnostics did, that the material world was evil and that the Jehovah of the Old Testament was a cruel and indifferent God who created this earthly realm of suffering. For Gnostics, the greater God resides beyond in the spiritual realm, or Pleroma. *Germanorden* reasoning is convoluted,<sup>29</sup> but Rahn argued in his book *Lucifer's Servants* that Lucifer was the true god of light worshiped by the Cathars, not the wicked or irresponsible Jehovah (known as the Demiurge by Gnostics). Rahn and others believed that the Cathars had somehow smuggled holy objects out of the castle Montségur when it was under siege by papal forces in 1244 CE and that they later came into the possession of the Knights Templar, who may also have held Gnostic beliefs. Legend has it that the Templars hid the Grail, the Ark of the



Covenant, or both, in Jerusalem when it was held by Christian knights and that they took these objects with them when the Holy Land was lost. According to this tradition, the secrets are still buried in a hidden cache.

Interestingly enough, contemporary writers Picknett and Prince in *The Templar Revelation* come to similar conclusions regarding alliances between the Cathars and the Templars as well as the disposition of the Ark and the Grail. They also discuss sacred sexuality in the early Church and the role of Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist, but of course they do not connect these topics to Nordic god-men in the *Germanorden* tradition.<sup>30</sup> According to some sources, Himmler gave Rahn what amounted to a blank check to discover the Grail, which had, through twisted logic, come to be seen as part of a secret German religion, connected to the Cathars and crushed out of existence by the Church. The Grail, they believed, had great power, including the conferring of immortality.

So as in the first of the series, fact and legend about the Nazi occult frame *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Those villainous Nazis are at it again, and Indiana Jones agrees to stop them once he finds out that his father, Jones Senior (Sean Connery), is missing while looking for it. Once “Junior” finds his father, the elder Professor Jones tells him, “If it is captured by the Nazis, the armies of darkness will march across the face of the earth. The quest for the Grail is not Archeology. It’s a race against evil.” The film follows the general line of what is known and speculated concerning German belief in the Grail’s power.

Like the Ark in *Lost Ark*, the cup does turn out to have occult power in *Last Crusade*, reminiscent of the Grail as described in Eschenbach’s *Parzifal*, which was standard reading for German occultists because of its supposed *völkisch* origins and in which the Grail is a stone instead of a cup. An old hermit describes its power to the hero Parzifal: “Never did such illness overcome a man that if he see that stone one day he cannot die during the week that comes soonest after. . . . And if he were to see the stone for 200 years, nothing would change, except his hair might turn grey. Such power does the stone give to man that his flesh and bone receive youth without delay.”<sup>31</sup>

The film builds on these aspects of the Grail, but pictures it as a cup in the final sequence. At the start of the film, Donovan, the Henry Ford-like industrialist who turns out to be in cahoots with the Nazis (Ford was a Hitler admirer in the 1930s), exclaims to Jones, echoing von Eschenbach’s description of the holy object, “The Holy Grail, Dr. Jones! The chalice used by Christ during the last supper! The cup

that caught his blood at the crucifixion and was entrusted to Joseph of Aramathea . . . Eternal life, Dr. Jones! Eternal youth to whomever drinks from the cup." When the Germans and Jones's party reach the Grail's sanctuary, Donovan exclaims, "The Nazis want to write themselves into the Grail legend, take on the world. . . . But I want the Grail itself, the cup that gives everlasting life. Hitler can have the world, but he can't take it with him." Then the film demonstrates the power of the Grail, similar to that described in *Parzifal*, when water poured from it heals Jones Senior, who is dying after being shot.

When our hero and the Nazis locate the Grail, they find it guarded by one of the knights who had brought it there. "The last of three brothers," the ancient man tells them, "who swore to find the Grail and guard it," which he had done for some thousand years, another testimony to the cup's power from von Eschenbach. Those with a little knowledge of the occult might notice the red cross on the old knight's baldric, which looks a bit like the "splayed cross" of the Knights Templar, with its four bent edges, an appropriate guardian for the Grail according to legend. The Templars, who began as guardians of travelers in the Holy Land during the Crusades, quickly and mysteriously accumulated enormous wealth and, as mentioned above, were rumored to house a great secret in their Jerusalem stronghold. Von Eschenbach describes the Templars in *Parzival* as guardians of the Grail.

All of the Indiana Jones films share the cautionary tale subtext that characterizes the occult film. In most occult films, bad things happen to those who engage in the occult. In the first of the trilogy, Professor Jones's museum-director friend Marcus sets the tone for the cautionary tale theme when speaking of the Ark's occult power. "It is something that man was not meant to disturb," he says. "Death has always surrounded it. It is not of this earth." The wicked priest of Kali gets his just deserts for trying to use the occult for personal gain in *Temple of Doom*, and all those who actually lust for the Grail in *The Last Crusade* die because of their desire for power. Marcus tells Donovan and the Germans, "You're meddling with powers you cannot possibly comprehend," which proves to be the case for the evildoers and even the apparently repentant Elsa. Although Indiana Jones is the conventional "doubter" character in the early part of all of these films, he has to be restrained by Jones Senior from trying to reach the cup at the end of *Last Crusade*; and we can assume that his ability to check his desire for the Grail as an archeological find, as well as its supernatural powers, spares his life.

*Cinema of the Occult* informs readers about basic elements of existing occult paths by showing how, as in the *Indiana Jones* series,

filmmakers use, and sometimes misuse or downright abuse, the occult approaches that they adapt as framing devices for their work. I do not address films that use plots that are framed by an occult system made up in whole cloth by a scriptwriter. Neither do I address films with occult characters from legend, such as vampires or werewolves. Rather, *Cinema of the Occult* discusses films that adapt contemporary occult religions as frame of reference, focusing especially on the New Age, Satanism, Wicca (or neo paganism) and Spiritualism, along with a brief look in chapter 6 at films that adapt occult belief systems that are paths less traveled.

I do not attempt an encyclopedic approach, with discussions of *all* films that have some reference to the occult paths of my topic. There are far too many, and I can discuss only a sampling. I have come to believe that the film industry produces such films faster than I can write about them. No sooner had I completed my discussion of the *Exorcist* films, for instance, than *The Exorcist: The Beginnings* was released, and due to the popularity of the occult film, new ones appear regularly at the cineplex. In analyzing a sampling of occult films that is representative of them all, I hope that *Cinema of the Occult* gives readers both knowledge about the contemporary occult religions and a framework for understanding films that adapt them.

One can hardly discuss a subject so central to the twenty-first-century culture wars as alternative and emerging spiritualities without pointing out the powerful social issues implicit to the topic. Cultural studies have been in the forefront of literary criticism for some time. Stephen Greenblatt, perhaps the best known cultural critic, writes of literature and the arts as “fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses.”<sup>32</sup> Greenblatt’s view of literature as a reflection of culture is equally true of film. In discussing film as a cultural product, Michael Wood sums up an oft-repeated maxim: “What remains constant is an oblique but unbroken connection to the historical world. All movies mirror reality in some way or other. . . . We are not likely to read too much into the usually rosy mirror-world of the movies, because we can’t *not* see our world in the mirror.”<sup>33</sup>

The occult films discussed in this book reflect some of the deepest concerns of our culture, and no discussion of the occult and films that adapt it would be complete without addressing how they present these issues. These films portray the spiritual groping of our time for answers to life’s conundrums. Why are we here? What happens to us when we die? Why is there evil in the world? The growth of new religious movements suggests not only that many no longer find the Judeo-Christian answers to these hard questions to be acceptable but

also that the mass audience is interested in thinking about new approaches to the old questions and old answers. On one level these films reflect the spiritual searching of those who seek alternatives to traditional religious teachings in the quest for the numinous. On another, they adapt the occult to dramatize issues beyond religion: fear of the Other in the Satanic film; reactions positive and negative to feminine empowerment in the Wiccan film; and issues of colonialism in films about voodoo. *Cinema of the Occult*, then, analyzes occult films from the perspective that they are, as Grixti describes the popular arts, "reflectors and affirmations of social and cultural realities" and assumes that study of them "remains valid and profitable."<sup>34</sup> Many of those that I discuss are far from artistically satisfying, but they provide fascinating insights to occult paths and our society's reaction to those who travel them, as well as social commentary.

It could be argued that most of the esoteric systems in contemporary practice are part of the both praised and criticized phenomenon of the New Age. This much used and misused term describes a broad pattern of beliefs that provides a logical, and fascinating, introduction to the discussion of the occult film.

## 2

## “It is the dawning . . .”: The New Age in Film

## EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

“IT IS THE DAWNING OF THE AGE OF AQUARIUS, THE AGE OF AQUARIUS, AQUARIUS, AQUARIUS. . . .”<sup>1</sup> So go the lines from the “American tribal love rock” musical *Hair*, first performed in 1968. The lyrics sum up the feeling rampant in the land that a New Age of consciousness was aborning, one that would transform the planet. *Hair*, however, is really a manifesto of the Haight-Ashbury, flower-power ethic of the 1960s in contrast to the ménage of beliefs, lifestyles, and approaches to the divine that would emerge in the 1980s, most of them opposed to the drug culture of the 1960s and perhaps a majority of them in disagreement with the socialist economic views and utopianism of the earlier period.

So just what *is* the New Age? In her book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Marilyn Ferguson describes a “great, shuddering, irrevocable shift overtaking us” that “is not a new political, religious, or philosophical system. It is a new mind—the ascendance of a startling worldview that gathers into its framework break-throughs in science and insights from earliest recorded thought.”<sup>2</sup> Ferguson uses the term *conspiracy* to mean a shared level of consciousness rather than the generally understood meaning of a plot. She never mentions the words “New Age,” but her book pretty clearly describes the phenomenon. However, a single definition of this collection of belief, ideology, and spiritual paths is even less useful than one definition, say, of Christianity, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, all of which come in infinite variety. The New Age includes elements of all of the above, plus a healthy dose of American transcendentalism, Theosophy, Native American shamanism, and much more. But at the core of the New Age is a nascent spirituality—or rather a collection of nascent spiritualities, most of which posit aspects of the occult and the potential for transcendence beyond the veil.

Indeed, the most central element, the strain that runs through most New Age paths, is transcendence—the assumption that this world is

but one plane of reality and that other levels can be reached, usually through some practice definable as occult. Conservative Christians decry the growth of New Age beliefs that posit contact with the numinous without aid of a church as yet another indication of the advent of the Antichrist, but Jesus Christ figures prominently in much New Age thought. Many, if not most, who have trumpeted the arrival of the New Age would agree with nineteenth-century transcendentalist sage Ralph Waldo Emerson, certainly a seminal influence on those who have announced the Age of Aquarius. In an address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, Emerson proclaimed:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished by its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness in man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in Man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."<sup>3</sup>

Basic to transcendentalism and to much New Age philosophy is the belief that God is within us and our individual souls are part of the Over Soul, Emerson's term for the creative force of the universe and the divine light. "Within man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal one."<sup>4</sup>

Emerson echoes an ancient train of transcendentalist thought that he gleaned from the Indian holy book *The Bhagavad-Gita*, as well as the writings of Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and others. Whether they have read his works or just absorbed his ideas from the culture through which they have resonated, New Age writers have been deeply influenced by Emerson, his fellow transcendentalists, and the sources of his inspiration. No clearer example could be given of this trickle-down effect than the similarity of popular New Age spokesperson Shirley MacLaine's description of Christ to Emerson's: "The great spiritual masters such as Christ and the Buddha were totally in touch with their higher unlimited selves and were therefore capable of accomplishing whatever they desired . . . . While the goal of realizing oneself is basically quite simple it is also awesome. It is to realize that we are part of God . . . which is to say love and light."<sup>5</sup>

In the tradition of transcendentalism, most New Agers focus on the spirituality of the individual self. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson extols

the intuition as the proper guide, exclaiming, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius."<sup>6</sup> He tells his audience to distrust the accepted views of society. Emerson did not view the *self* as an isolated entity, but rather a soul connected to the great Over Soul that unites all being. Paul Heelas describes the New Age perspective in similar terms: "Indeed, the most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'self' itself is to experience 'god,' 'the goddess,' 'the source,' 'Christ consciousness,' the 'inner child,' the 'way of the heart,' or most simply and, I think, most frequently, 'inner spirituality.'"<sup>7</sup> The quest for spiritual transcendence through the self undergirds most New Age thought.

In his essay "New Thought and the New Age," J. Gordon Melton, surely the most respected scholar of new religious movements in the United States, connects the New Age with Eastern transcendentalist spirituality, defining it as "a revivalist religious impulse directed toward the esoteric/metaphysical/Eastern groups and to the mystical strain in all religions."<sup>8</sup> Much of the Eastern influence no doubt comes through American transcendentalism and Theosophy, both heavily indebted to Hindu and Buddhist works. Also, the 1960s saw an influx of Hindu gurus such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement; Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, spiritual leader of a short-lived and controversial community in Oregon; and A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, father of the Krishna Consciousness movement (the Hari Krishna). Diem and Lewis go so far as to assert that Hinduism "constitutes the most significant component to the contemporary New Age Movement."<sup>9</sup>

Hanegraaff makes an important point when he writes, "The initial fact about the 'New Age' is that it concerns a *label* attached indiscriminately to whatever seems to fit it, on the basis of what are essentially pre-reflective intuitions. As a result, *New Age* means very different things to different people."<sup>10</sup> To a certain extent, as the term appears in common parlance one might echo science-fiction writer Damon Knight who, when struggling to define the science-fiction genre, wrote that science fiction means "what we point to when we say it."<sup>11</sup>

Shirley MacLaine should get credit for much of the popularity of New Age concepts, with her numerous books and her TV special *Out on a Limb*. Perhaps it is appropriate that MacLaine, an established product of the Hollywood star system, should be a spokesperson for the New Age because the film industry has profited a good deal from its ideas. New Age-influenced films abound, and for very good rea-

sons. For one thing, large numbers of people believe in reincarnation, spirit guides and angels, psychic ability, spiritual survival, earth power, and other elements of New Age philosophy. Gallop and Castelli's polls cited in *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* show that 50 percent of those polled believe in angels,<sup>12</sup> 46 percent in ESP, and 24 percent in precognition. One might easily assume that these people would enjoy stories on such topics and buy tickets to films. But perhaps even more important, New Age beliefs provide the sensationalism and romance that Hollywood loves, as well as conflict, the most important element of drama.

John Lash divides New Age concepts into a dozen categories, including:

- Ancient Wisdom (restoration of lost "technologies")
- Gaia (awareness of the Earth as living being—ecological concern)
- Masters (those who have achieved enlightenment or godlike status)
- Planetarization (unification of humanity)
- Channeling (information from the spirit world)
- Holistics and Healing (from holistic medicine to world healing)
- East/West Studies (melding of science and mysticism—oriental healing)
- Martial Arts (the mystique of the warrior from kung fu to *The Force*)
- Paranormal Events and Psychic Powers (from telekinesis to prediction)
- Reincarnation (progressive evolution of the soul)
- Earth Changes (similar to Gaia movement)
- Service and Group Effort (humanitarian impulses)
- Co-creation (creating one's own reality—godlike powers).<sup>13</sup>

All of the above categories, in one way or another, share in the quality that unites the New Age—transcendence achieved through some occult practice. Not all fit the filmmaker's or storyteller's paradigm. But some of them have been fertile ground for script ideas and frames of reference. No better introduction to the adaptation of a medley of New Age philosophy in film could be cited than the *Star Wars* series. In developing the myth that underpins his stories, writer/director George Lucas focuses on many of the principles Lash proposes but adds a key concept that seems central to the New Age: *The Force*.

The original trilogy is a sword-and-sorcery tale, with light sabers instead of swords, technobabble instead of magic, and an evil emperor instead of an evil wizard, but New Age concepts abound. *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), establishes the New Age frame with its heavy dose of Eastern mysticism. The good guys are the Jedi Knights, who have been nearly wiped out by the evil Darth Vader and the Emperor he serves. These Jedi are masters and custodians of ancient wisdom in the New Age sense and proficient in their own version of martial arts,



which often defies physical laws of science. The story line supplies such occult events as mind-to-mind contact, foreknowledge of events to come, and psychokinetic abilities by adepts.

But it is The Force that binds the plot, a New Age concept similar to the Over Soul and a spiritual element that Lash does not mention. In the opening film, when Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) meets Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness), he gets lessons in this philosophy from the old master. Obi-Wan tells him of Darth Vader and in the process informs the viewer of the framing device for the entire series: "A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights . . . Vader was seduced by the Dark Side of The Force." When young Luke replies, "The Force?" Obi-Wan explains: "The Force is what gives the Jedi his power. It is an energy field that is created by all living things. It surrounds us, it penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together."

Walter Robinson connects The Force with elements of Eastern mysticism, what the Chinese call "ch'i" and the Japanese refer to as "ki": "Eastern philosophy," he notes, "most especially philosophical Taoism and Zen Buddhism, plays a major role in the *Star Wars* mythology. This is most true in relation to the martial-arts philosophy of the Jedi,"<sup>14</sup> which, he writes, is central to Taoism. But other critics find influences in *Star Wars* from Stoicism, Hegel, Aristotle, and many other sources. After citing the Joseph Campbell monomyth as a source for the film, Andrews Gordon writes, "Lucas has created a myth for our times, fashioned out of bits and pieces of twentieth-century U. S. popular mythology. . . . Lucas has raided the junkyards of our popular culture and rigged a working myth out of scrap."<sup>15</sup> The religious and philosophical backgrounds that Robinson and other critics find in the *Star Wars* films have been absorbed from the New Age into the popular consciousness that Gordon describes.

Luke must then "learn the ways of The Force," with Obi-Wan teaching him to use his light saber, even when blindfolded. "Remember," Obi-Wan tells his pupil, "a Jedi can feel The Force flowing through him. . . . Your eyes can deceive you. Don't trust them." And finally, when Luke attacks the Death Star, his computer is unreliable. He must turn it off and "Use the Force," as the departed Obi-Wan whispers to him. The old Jedi's various explanations are the lecture element of the occult film.

The lessons on the Force continue in the second film, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), in which Luke is further tutored by Yoda, who seems to be a sort of high priest of The Force as well as a Jedi. When Luke crash-lands on his planet, Yoda gives him lessons. "For my ally

is the Force," Yoda tells Luke in his amusing Chaucerian English, "and a powerful ally it is. Life breathes it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous things are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you. You, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere: yes, even between the land and the ship."

All of this sounds much like Emerson's transcendentalism as adapted by the New Age along with pantheism, the concept that God, or the God Spirit, resides in all matter. Emerson describes the Over Soul as, "the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."<sup>16</sup> Obi-Wan's description is even more similar to Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Unified Field, which he describes as energy surrounding the Earth. Francis Mossé, a teacher at Maharishi University, describes the Field: "Beyond all matter and energy is the Unified Field, the source of all energy and creativity that is expressed in our universe. . . . When our conscious mind directly experiences the Unified Field, all the qualities of the Field, such as infinite creativity, dynamism, unboundedness, and perfect balance are directly enlivened."<sup>17</sup> James Redfield, a pundit of the New Age who mixes a bit of quantum physics in his philosophy, has one of his characters describe a similar concept as the third of his *Celestine Prophecies* in the novel of that name, made into a 2006 film: "In other words, the basic stuff of the universe, at its core, is looking like a kind of pure energy that is malleable to human intention and expectation . . . as though our expectation itself causes our energy to flow out into the world and affect other energy systems."<sup>18</sup>

But Lucas has to add something to his transcendental vision to turn it into drama—conflict. Hence, we get the Dark Side of the Force, which neither Emerson nor the Maharishi nor Redfield, all of whom share a sunny optimism, envisions. Before he dies in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), Yoda warns Luke, "Remember, a Jedi's strength grows from The Force. And beware. Anger, fear, passion: the Dark side are they." A true Jedi, like a true Eastern advocate of martial arts, must rise above anger and passion to be in touch with The Force, which Luke achieves in the final confrontation in *Return of the Jedi*.

When Lucas wrote the prequels, he expanded on his myth. In *The Phantom Menace* (1999), Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) plays the child who is later to become Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker's father, and he is literally the child of The Force. Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) speaks with Anakin's mother, who tells him that there was no father: "I gave birth. I raised him. I can't explain how." But Qui-Gon tells us how a virgin birth could happen later in speaking to Anakin: "Midi-Chlorians are a microscopic life form that resides within

all living cells.” Life, it seems, is symbiotic with them. “Without the Midi-Chlorians, life could not exist and we would know no light of The Force. They continually speak to us, telling us the will of The Force.”<sup>19</sup> Anakin, Qui-Gon believes, was created by the Midi-Chlorians, to fulfill “the prophecy of one who will bring balance to The force.” The Christ parallel couldn’t be more obvious, except that Qui-Gon is off by one generation.

*The Attack of the Clones* (2002), episode 2 in Lucas’s chronological time scheme, has Anakin grown up and a fledgling Jedi, apprentice to Obi-Wan. But alas, he is burdened by pride and evinces all the faults that Yoda enumerated to Luke. Jedi knights should be above the passions of the flesh, but young Anakin falls head over heels in love with the beautiful Queen Padme Amidala (Natalie Portman), who had been a sort of older sister to him in *The Phantom Menace*. Padme’s name offers yet another example of Eastern influence in the film. One of the most important meditation mantras in Tibetan Buddhism is “*Om mani padme hum*,” and according to the Dalai Lama Web page, *Padme* means *Lotus*. The Dalai Lama goes on to write that the purity of the lotus grows from the mud of attachment.<sup>20</sup> Also, Anakin kills all of the creatures who had kidnapped and given mortal injury to his mother, not in self-defense but in revenge. In the *Star Wars* frame, he becomes prey to The Dark Side of The Force and eventually loses his soul to it as Darth Vader because he lacks the detachment of a Jedi. And he has been warned. “Attachment is forbidden,” the young Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor) has warned him. “Possession is forbidden. Compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is essential.”

*Revenge of the Sith*, the third prequel, offers a conversation between Anakin and Yoda that underscores Anakin’s failure, a failure that will turn him into Darth Vader. He is secretly married to Padme, who is pregnant with his child (or children, as it turns out), and he has a vision in which he sees her dying. Distraught, he goes to Yoda for advice, telling him that he had had a vision without revealing its nature. Yoda’s response echoes the sages of New Age spirituality:

YODA. Careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the Dark Side. . . . Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed, that is.

ANAKIN. What must I do, Master Yoda?

YODA. Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose.

Detachment from desire, says Yoda, is the path to spiritual wholeness, and detachment in the Eastern tradition, as we shall see in films influenced by New Age thought, is central to achievement of transcendence.

The *Star Wars* movies' plots combine a number of New Age concepts along with a smattering of Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*. John Baxter claims that Lucas did not read Campbell but did listen to a book-on-tape edition while driving his car.<sup>21</sup> But he seems to have profited from the experience. Robinson writes that Lucas "learned from Campbell that underlying religious mythologies are archetypal patterns which reflect universal truth. Dig deeply enough into any of the great spiritual traditions and one comes upon a reservoir of truth common to all and the source of each," a concept central to much New Age thinking.<sup>22</sup> The *Star Wars* films offer a mélange of New Age concepts. Most other films that adapt New Age ideas focus on only one aspect of New Age thinking. Some offer interesting critiques of Christianity. Other plot concepts include the interactions of humans and angels or spirit guides, reincarnation and karma, Gaia and the spirituality of nature, and psychic or psychokinetic phenomena.

Central in all of these approaches to New Age thought is transcendence—the belief that a greater reality exists than the one we perceive and that we can transcend the material world to the spiritual. Christian culture in the West is sharply divided into what Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, called Apollonian and Dionysian approaches. In describing Greek culture, he found the Apollonian frame of mind focused on restraint, control, and reason, while the Dionysian valued ecstasy and primal experience. The two approaches survive in Christianity. A contrast of the formality of an Episcopal Church service as opposed to the ecstatic speaking in tongues in Pentecostal worship offers obvious parallels to Nietzsche's dichotomy.

New Age spiritual approaches show the same range, from the Dionysian ceremonies of a Wiccan coven or ecstatic dancing and chanting of a Hari Krishna community to the Apollonian solitary meditation of a Buddhist or Hindu devotee. But the person quietly meditating may experience an inward ecstasy as intense as that of the coven or the devotees. In his novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert Heinlein's wise old Jubal Harshaw explains the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy and says, "'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' are two sides of one coin—a nun kneeling in her cell, holding perfectly still, can be in ecstasy more frenzied than any priestess of Pan Priapus celebrating the vernal equinox. Ecstasy is in the skull."<sup>23</sup> Ecstasy is central in the quest for transcendence, be it Dionysian or Apollonian, in most New

Age approaches. Also central is finding this transcendence outside what many perceive as the restrictive, patriarchal, and exclusionary nature of Christianity. Thus, New Age spirituality demonstrates an important cultural divide in the Western World, and the study of film, an excellent barometer of the public pulse, offers fascinating insights into shifts away from traditional Christianity.

“WOULD YOU SEE GOD, SEE ME; OR SEE THEE”: CHRISTIANITY  
IN THE NEW AGE FILM: *STIGMATA* AND *DOGMA*

Emerson's words quoted above sum up what amounts to a truism in the works of New Age writers: that no one needs an organized church to reach God. In *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Dominican priest Matthew Fox writes, “Does the fact that the Christ became incarnate in Jesus exclude the Christ becoming incarnate in others—Lao-tsu, or Buddha, or Moses, or Sarah, or Sojourner Truth, or Gandhi, or me or you? . . . The Cosmic Christ still needs to be born in all of us.”<sup>24</sup> *Stigmata*, one of the more interesting New Age films, develops precisely this concept.

The premise of *Stigmata* holds that an ancient manuscript containing words of Jesus not previously revealed has been found, but the manuscript threatens the power of the Church. The opening segment of the film captures the issue of Roman Catholic Church authority. A priest, Father Andrew Kiernan (Gabriel Byrne), has been sent to Brazil to investigate a possible miracle, the appearance of the Virgin's face on a wall. This image turns out to be only an accident of nature, but in a church there, he finds a real miracle in progress. At the funeral of a priest, Father Alameida, a statue of the Virgin drips tears of blood at the eyes, and analysis proves the blood to be real. When Father Andrew returns to Rome and describes the statue to his superior, Cardinal Houseman (Jonathan Pryce), the Cardinal scolds him for not bringing the statue back for investigation. Andrew says he'd planned to do so but found that “the statue has become a cornerstone of their faith”; to which the cardinal replies, “The cornerstone of their faith is the Church, not a statue.” The cardinal's words would be anathema to New Age thinkers, and even Father Andrew has begun to doubt the ultimate authority of the Church in all things spiritual.

Conflict between the individual and the Church underpins the film. Frankie Paige (Patricia Arquette), a hairdresser and a professed atheist, is the central figure. Her mother visits Brazil and sends Frankie a rosary that Father Alameida had owned. The spirit of the priest then

possesses the girl, periodically bringing the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Father Kiernan, still the Church's designated debunker of miracles, investigates and becomes the occult film's conventional doubter character. The rest of the plot consists of Father Kiernan going from doubt to belief; Frankie's channeling (in which a departed soul speaks through the medium) from Father Alameida of the words from the mysterious ancient manuscript that is the focal point of the plot; and eventually a confrontation with Cardinal Houseman, who would kill to suppress the message from this manuscript.

The film is essentially a thriller, but the script includes interesting bits of dialogue that reflect New Age criticism of organized religion. While Andrew is in Rome, Father Delmonico, a priest who translates ancient documents, tells him that there are thirty-five gospels. He is allowed to translate every third page of any one of them. Other orders of the Church have the same arrangement, and "the truth of any document is only known to a very powerful few. . . . We live in a highly competitive world, Andrew. The Church is no different." Andrew responds gloomily, "Nothing ever gets out of here, does it: unless of course, they want it to."

As the plot funnels down, Andrew has to deal both with the obsessed cardinal and with the spirit of Father Alameida. But along the way he learns more about the manuscript, discussing it with a defrocked and excommunicated priest who had helped Alameida steal it. The former priest says of the church where they meet, "It's a building. The true church of Jesus is inside. I love Jesus. I don't need an institution between me and him, no priests, no churches." And he quotes the manuscript: "The kingdom of God is all inside you, all around you. Not in buildings of wood and stone. 'Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me.'"

Frankie has written these same words on the wall of her apartment and had spoken them in Aramaic while in trance and channeling Alameida. After the sensational ending and before the final credits, the film gives this message on screen:

These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke. Whoever discovers the meaning of these words will not taste death.

The film then notes that this and other quotations from the so-called suppressed manuscript actually appear in the Apocrypha,<sup>25</sup> specifically The Book of Thomas from the Nag Hammadi scrolls discovered in 1945, and that the Church does not recognize the work.

The Gospel of Thomas (the correct title) is the product of Gnostic Christianity, declared a heresy in the early history of the Church. Ac-

tually, the words of Jesus that appear in *Thomas* are often similar to those that appear in the four Gospels. Scholars believe that the New Testament Gospels, which were written from fifty to one hundred years after the death of Christ, were based on manuscripts that recorded Jesus's message and circulated among early Christians. These hypothetical manuscripts have been given the names "Q" and "M," based on differences in the Gospels. Clearly, *Thomas* is also largely based on those documents, but with a Gnostic spin. Some of the quotations in the film demonstrate why *Thomas* would appeal to a New Age audience, as do the following lines from the text of the work: "When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty."<sup>26</sup> Like the lines from the book quoted in the film, this passage suggests that people can find God without the Church, a fundamental principle of Gnostic paths. According to *Thomas*, as in Eastern mysticism and New Age writings, transcendence comes from gnosis, or knowledge, of the spirit within, an approach that has strong appeal for those who seek ecstatic spiritual experience, be it Apollonian or Dionysian, outside mainstream or evangelical Christianity.

Both Frankie and Father Kiernan are the traditional doubter characters from the occult film, and the rosary brings each to belief. Avowed atheist Frankie achieves mystical transcendence through this rosary, which Frankie's mother, in an action emblematic of postmodern consumer society, turns into a bit of jewelry. But it becomes the medium for what Graham Ward calls a violent yoking of the sexual and the spiritual. Frankie, he notes, has been "penetrated" in a rather brief sexual encounter at the opening, but the ecstasy of being penetrated by the spirit far transcends that experience. "The isolated body [of Frankie] is brought into relation, even violently, with other bodies: objects, birds, the body of writings hidden by Father Alameida. In this relationality, there is transcendence into ecstasy."<sup>27</sup> Both the rejection of orthodox church doctrine and Frankie's ecstatic and pantheistic transcendence clearly link the film with New Age thought.

While Hollywood films have most often treated Christianity sympathetically, a strong undercurrent of films present negative images, especially of Elmer Gantry-type conservative Christians.<sup>28</sup> Filmic portrayals of Catholicism were usually quite positive in pre-Aquarian days. However, even the studiously pious *Song of Bernadette* (1943) shows the rigidity of the Roman Catholic Church, even though it eventually made Bernadette a saint. Although the dean of the cathedral in her village finally recognizes the validity of her vision, he still

tries to get her to admit that the lady she has seen in visions did not refer to herself as the "immaculate conception," as Bernadette reports, because such a name goes against dogma. It was the Virgin Mary who immaculately conceived, and therefore, to support the dogma of his Church, the dean wants Bernadette to admit that it was the Virgin she had seen, an admission the girl will not make; and officials of the church continue grilling her in her convent, even while she is on her deathbed.

The Church's rigid defense of its dogma drives Kevin Smith's 1999 eponymously titled film *Dogma* in a clever spoof of dogmatic rigidity. The premise is that two of the "Grigori," or Watchers, left behind to observe humanity after The Fall in Genesis, dream of returning to Heaven. Loki (Matt Damon) was the Angel of Death until he got tired of killing and quit the job. He and another angel, Bartleby (Ben Affleck), are doomed to stay on Earth. They want a way back. Then they hear that a Roman Catholic cardinal (here played by George Carlin) has decided to make the Church more upbeat, including a statue outside his cathedral of "Buddy Christ," replete with wide grin and thumb up. The cardinal will issue plenary indulgences (forgiveness of all past sins) on a specific day for all who enter the church; the renegade angels decide that this is their chance to obtain forgiveness and return to Heaven. They will go to the church, become human by losing their wings, and die after they have been through the archway.

Indeed, Roman Catholic dogma holds that the Church can give indulgences providing forgiveness of all sin. In Matthew 16:19 Christ tells Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven: and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." In Church dogma, the Pope is the successor to Peter, the rock on whom Christ promised his church would be built, and the Pope is infallible. The medieval Church's method of raising money by selling forgiveness of sin through indulgences did much to spark the Protestant Reformation. But the situation of Loki and Bartleby establishes a conundrum based on the quotation from Matthew. They were banished from Heaven. But the Church can bind Heaven in giving indulgences. Also, God is infallible. So if the angels succeed in getting back to Heaven because of the indulgence, they prove God fallible, which would end all existence.

So the Metatron (here played by Alan Rickman), an angel often identified as a messenger of God, comes to Bethany Sloane (Linda Fiorentino) to give her the mission of stopping Loki and Bartleby. Stories of the Metatron in the Jewish Talmud and Midrash describe him as an angel of fire, so Smith provides a visual pun by having Beth-



any douse him with a fire extinguisher.<sup>29</sup> The remainder of the film is a combination of “on-the-road” slapstick, as Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and director Kevin Smith), the “prophets” promised by the Metatron, accompany her on her quest. Jay and Silent Bob are sex-obsessed archetypal slackers and stoners, retreads from *Clerks* (1994) and *Mallrats* (1995) who were to be reincarnated in yet another Smith film, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001).

Smith punctuates *Dogma*'s low comedy with social satire and comments on religion that echo New Age attitudes toward organized Christianity. Bethany and company meet Serendipity (Salma Hayek), a muse who is working at a strip club (she has writer's block). She tells the group that she inspired the Bible, but she couldn't control the editing. Men actually wrote it, hence the paternalism and male God figure. The film privileges New Age feminism by referring to God alternately as male and female. Bethany's dialogue is an example. In a discussion with Bartleby, when neither knows who the other is, she says, “When you're a kid, you never question the whole faith thing. God's in Heaven, and he's, she's, always got her eye on you.” Then Bartleby responds, using male pronouns. This sort of waffling permeates the film and foreshadows the end, when God finally appears as a young woman. Serendipity says, “See, I told you She [God] was a woman,” to which Rufus responds, “She's not really a woman; She's not really anything.”

Rufus (Chris Rock), Smith's fictional thirteenth apostle, who claims he was omitted from the Bible because he is Black, literally falls into the plot, dropping from Heaven to help. The name Rufus appears twice in the New Testament, once as the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried Christ's cross, and later in Romans as one of the elect. Since “Rufus” translates as “red,” some biblical scholars speculate that he was a Black man. The film plays on this interpretation and even has Rufus say that Jesus was Black, his racial identity suppressed because “white folks only want to hear the good shit—life eternal, a place in God's Heaven. But as soon as you hear that you're getting the good shit from a Black Jesus, people freak.” He also sums up the New Age attitude toward institutional Christianity. Bethany asks him what Christ is like and the thirteenth apostle answers: “He likes to listen to people talk. Christ loved to sit around the fire and listen to me and the other guys. . . . His only beef with mankind is the shit that gets carried out in his name—wars, bigotry, televangelism. The big one, though, is the factioning of religion. He said mankind got it all wrong by taking a good idea and building a belief structure on it. . . . I just think it's better to have ideas. You can change an idea. A belief structure is trickier. People die for it. People kill for it. The whole of

existence is in jeopardy right now because of the Catholic belief structure in the plenary indulgence bullshit."

This sort of in-your-face dialogue on the Church is the best part of the film. While it does not directly address transcendence, as does *Stigmata*, it certainly shows the Church's dogma as an impediment to achieving it.

### IT'S DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN: REINCARNATION AND KARMA IN NEW AGE CINEMA

In *The Bhagavad-Gita*, the god Krishna comes to lecture the warrior Arjuna, who, at the moment of battle, is reluctant to kill kinsmen who oppose him. Arjuna must rid himself of hesitation, Krishna teaches, because there is no death. Krishna proclaims, "As the embodied soul continuously passes in this body from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change."<sup>30</sup> A. C. Baktivedanta Swami Prabhupada brought the teachings of the *Gita* to the United States at an opportune moment in American culture: the spiritual soup of the late 1960s. Prabhupada taught his disciples traditional Hindu ideas about karma and reincarnation, and the ecstatic Hari Krishna of the 1970s helped spread those concepts. Prabhupada's teachings no doubt played some part in the growth of belief in reincarnation in the past thirty years, but they are also symptomatic of that growth. A 1999 poll cited on the Web site *ReligiousTolerance.org.*, updated in 2003, finds that 25 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation but specifies 40 percent belief among the 25 to 29 age group, a prime target audience for films.<sup>31</sup>

Karma, which Melton calls "an overreaching law of moral consequences which is played out over a soul's many lifetimes,"<sup>32</sup> is central to rebirth in much New Age belief. The term comes from Hinduism and Buddhism. The concept might be confused with "good works" from the Christian tradition, but Eastern views on reincarnation make karma a more complex term, since karma accumulates through lifetimes and can create destiny over many lives. The *Bhagavad-Gita* tells us that karma determines incarnation into a better or worse state, and through successive lives, good karma can lead to the achievement of Nirvana, the union with Brahman, or God. The *Gita* specifies that individuals who are spiritually pure have achieved detachment from desires and follow prescribed rules within the caste they are born into. New Age thinking retains the emphasis on right action and, depending on the writer, the need for detachment, but of course ignores

caste. Buddhism similarly focuses on karma, detachment from desire, and the goal of ending incarnation in the flesh to achieve Nirvana.

The belief in reincarnation is not peculiar to the East. It runs through nearly all world cultures. Plato was not the first Greek philosopher to discuss the reincarnation of souls. But Socrates, Plato's speaker in works such as *Meno*, *The Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Timaeus*, gives a rather elaborate description of the afterlife and rebirth of the soul into a new body. The Romans admired Greek thought, and in Book Six of *The Aeneid*, Ovid has his hero Aeneas tour the underworld. There he gets a lecture from Anchises, who tells him that after death souls are first punished and purified. They spend 1,000 years in the Elysian Fields, then they drink from the river Lethe, whose waters keep them from remembering past lives before their souls enter new bodies.

Gnostic Christianity seems to have assumed reincarnation for those who did not achieve *gnosis*, or knowledge. According to St. Irenaeus who, in a bit of historical irony preserved knowledge of the heresy he opposed, recorded that Gnostics believe that a soul "will always transmigrate from one body to another until he has had experience in absolutely every kind of action that exists in the world. And when nothing is wanting to him, his soul, having been liberated, escapes from the God who is above the Angels, the makers of the world. In this manner all souls are saved."<sup>33</sup>

Even the Holy Qur'an suggests reincarnation, though orthodox Islam tends to ignore these passages in favor of others that describe Paradise in terms of gardens and Houri. In Sūrah 2:28, for instance, the angel Gabriel (who dictated the Holy Qur'an to the prophet) tells Mohammad,

And He gave you life;  
Then will He cause you to die,  
And will again bring you to life;  
And again to Him will ye return.

Other passages echo this theme. The Sufi, one of the paths of Islam, puts greater emphasis on reincarnation. Some Islamic scholars suggest that reincarnation might be stages before reaching the true Paradise described by the Prophet.

Most New Age writers assume reincarnation (*metempsychosis* is the technical term for the soul entering a new body). However, in New Age thought, the Eastern concept of being freed from the wheel of life to find loss of self in union with Brahman is largely lost. Rather,

most contemporary writers assume that continuous rebirth brings evolution toward spiritual perfection. As Hanegraaff puts it, New Age thinkers downplay the wheel of life and the iron laws of karma concepts. "The universal element of New Age ideas about survival," he writes, "is *progressive spiritual evolution* [italics his] considered as a process which started before birth and will continue beyond death."<sup>34</sup> Victor Raj, however, gives an Eastern perspective on Western views on reincarnation. He finds that the New Age perspective "illustrates that human beings are not willing, for any reason, to depart the present world, although they realize that it is the destiny of everyone to exit the planet sooner or later. Reincarnation is the tranquilizing rejoinder to the human failure to become modern Methuselas or Utnapishtims."<sup>35</sup> He cites the ancient Hindu Laws of Manu, which specify most unpleasant rebirths for those who commit specific crimes (for stealing grain, a man becomes a rat in the next life, and a horse thief becomes a tiger).

The New Age makes reincarnation rather rosier than the Eastern version, a change that fits the "happy ending" plot common to films. Reincarnation tunes into the New Age emphasis on transcendence, and it responds to the cultural imperative of answering more explicitly than do Christian denominations that question what happens when we die. But the reincarnation story also resonates with another important interest for film goers. One of Hollywood's and film audiences' favorite subjects is love; and reincarnation takes the subject a step further in positing "love across the ages," the undying love celebrated in song and fable.

In the occult film, one variation on the romance plot is doomed love. *The Way We Were* is not an occult film, but it is a prototypical doomed love story, with the Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford characters' conflict of values—those of the late 1960s on her part with the 1970s on his—dooming their marriage. The plotline has great appeal because many of us have experienced a passion so strong we thought it would last forever but somehow it did not. Similar stories abound in the occult film with the added dimension of pairings of individuals on different levels of being, and this difference dooms their love. The ghostly Captain in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* can have only a platonic relationship with the widow because the Captain has no body; the alien in *Star Man* might love his mortal lady, but he cannot take her to his home world; the space man in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* cannot leave Earth with Helen Benson who adores him; and the angel Dudley must check his desire for Julia Brougham in *The Bishop's Wife*.

IF YOU WANT SOMEONE WHO'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER, GET A  
DOG—OR A MUMMY: *THE MUMMY*

One of the early films on the subject of reincarnation, long before the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, is Universal International's 1932 production *The Mummy*. The film no doubt capitalizes on the publicity emanating from the 1922 discovery of the boy Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb, the curse on those who disturbed it, and the unnaturally large number of deaths among those who did. The credits list Nina Wilcox Putnam and Richard Schayer as authors of the story. John Balderston, who had rewritten the British stage version of *Dracula* for an American audience, wrote the script, which has interesting parallels with the film version of *Dracula*, released by Universal Studios shortly before *The Mummy*. But the film's script, as Leslie Halliwell notes, is also indebted to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Ring of Thoth."<sup>36</sup>

In Conan Doyle's story, John Vansittart Smith, a British Egyptologist visiting the Louvre, sees a strange-looking man unwrapping a mummy, the perfectly preserved remains of a beautiful woman. After threatening Smith, the man, Sosra, tells his story. He claims he was born 1,600 years before Christ and discovered an immortality potion. He took it himself and gave it to his beloved, along with an antidote. But she tired of immortality, took the antidote, and died. He had lost the ring in which the remainder of the antidote was stored and had just now found it in the exhibit. He takes the potion, and dies, embracing the ruins of the mummy he had unwrapped, which had deteriorated from its contact with air.

Clearly Balderston, Putnam, and Schayer had read Conan Doyle. Boris Karloff, who plays Ardath Bey, the equivalent of the Sosra character, *looks* like Conan Doyle's description of the Egyptian: "Over the temple and cheek bone it [his appearance] was as glazed and as shiny as varnished parchment. There was no suggestion of pores. One could not fancy a drop of moisture upon that arid surface. From brow to chin, however, it was cross-hatched by a million delicate wrinkles, which shot and interlaced as though Nature in some Maori mood had tried how wild and intricate a pattern she could devise."<sup>37</sup>

The opening footage establishes the reincarnation theme with the following words on screen: "This is the Scroll of Troth. Herein are set down the magic words by which Isis raised Osiris from the dead. Oh! Amon-Ra—Oh! God of Gods—Death is but the doorway to new life—We live today—we shall live again—In many forms shall we return Oh, mighty one." The lines establish the frame and also serve

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**Boris Karloff as Ardath Bey in *The Mummy* (1932). Image courtesy of Photofest, Inc.**

as part of the lecture element of the occult film. Balderston and his colleagues knew some Egyptology. The “Scroll of Troth” no doubt refers to the Book of the Dead, a compendium of texts, or vignettes, with magic spells on papyrus or linen that were buried with the dead, intended to help them in their journey to the afterlife. Apparently these texts, as well as spells carved on tomb walls or in sarcophagi,

were collected by later scribes and written on leather scrolls.<sup>38</sup> Thoth, which Balderston and his cohorts changed to “Troth,” is scribe for the gods in Egyptian myth and comes up repeatedly in the Book of the Dead, which dates to 1254 BCE, as guide and protector of souls.

Also, belief in reincarnation was one of the paths of religion in ancient Egypt. The Book of the Dead suggests metempsychosis. But the strain of Egyptian belief in rebirth is most apparent in surviving writings, which exist only in fragments, supposed to come from Thoth Hermes, or Hermes Trismegisthus, the Thrice Great Hermes, the legendary magician and author who was apparently named for the god Thoth. In one of these fragments, Horus, the son of Osiris, speaks as follows: “The soul passeth from form to form; and the mansions of her pilgrims are manifold. . . . Thou puttest off thy bodies as raiment; and as vesture dost thou fold them up. Thou art old, O Soul of man; yea, thou art from everlasting.”<sup>39</sup> This strain of belief, along with the play on the magical power of the Book of the Dead, provides the frame for *The Mummy*.

The story begins in 1921 with an archeological dig in Egypt, reminding the audience of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, which was still in the news in 1932. British archeologist Sir Joseph Whemple (Arthur Bryon) leads the dig, which unearths a tomb containing a quite unusual mummy, that of one Imhotep. Once again Balderston and company demonstrate their knowledge of Egyptology. An Imhotep was vizier to the pharaoh Zoser during the third millennium BCE and architect of the Step Pyramid of Saqqara, which inspired the great pyramids to come.<sup>40</sup> In the film, evidence at the site identifies Imhotep as high priest at the Temple of Karnak. Strangely, he was wrapped in linen, buried alive, and not given the invocations on his sarcophagus to lead him to the next life, “sentenced to death, not only in this world, but in the next.” He cannot be reincarnated.

The site also has a chest, with writing on it that puts a curse on anyone who opens it. Whemple’s associate Professor Muller (Edward Van Sloan, who had played Van Helsing in *Dracula*) is an expert in the occult and warns against opening the chest; he knows of the magic associated with such scrolls. But Sir Joseph’s curious assistant Ralph Norton (Bramwell Fletcher) sneaks a peek as soon as his boss’s back is turned. He discovers the Scroll of Troth inside. Clearly, Balderston alludes to the scrolls that eventually were collected as the Book of the Dead. But this Scroll of Troth has magic that can bring the dead to life rather than lead them to the afterlife. Here Balderston departs from established Egyptian myth, as none of the spells from the Book of the Dead promises such power. Nonetheless, when the assistant translates the words aloud, Imhotep returns from death, driving Norton mad.

The scene then shifts forward to 1932, still in Egypt with Sir Joseph's son Frank being led to the tomb of the Princess Anck-es-en-Amon by a mysterious Egyptian named Ardath Bey (Boris Karloff), who we later learn is Imhotep, brought to life by the Scroll of Troth.

But the point is that the reincarnation theme when it appears, as is so often the case in film, focuses on transcendence and endless love, which is in this case doomed to fail. Bey schemes to transcend death and bring back the Princess's soul. It currently resides in Helen Grosvenor (Zita Johann),<sup>41</sup> the love interest for young Frank Whemple (David Manners), who is the film's doubter<sup>42</sup> and has to be convinced of Helen's danger by the wise old professor Muller. Imhotep has Svengali-like power over Helen, and when he lures her to his apartment, he tells her of her soul's journey, which, he says, has "wandered through so many forms and so many ages" and now has taken Helen's body. "Your soul is in a mortal body," he tells the unconscious Helen, "renewed many times since we loved of old." His rather Byzantine plan fails, of course, and Imhotep's two deaths along with that of Whemple's assistant work out the cautionary tale element that so often appears in the occult film.

A true romantic might feel that Bey gets short shrift, however, as, like Conan Doyle's Sosra, his love was undying over centuries, and he had suffered mightily for his doomed passion. The soul of the Princess begins to awaken in Helen, and she tells him, "No man should ever suffer for woman as you have suffered for me." And Imhotep agrees, as he tells Helen/Anck-es-en-Amon when he prepares to kill her and send her on the journey she must make. "My love for you has lasted longer than the temples of our gods. No man ever suffered as I did for you. But the rest you may not know, not until you are about to go through the great night of terror and triumph, until you are ready to face the moment of horror for an eternity of love, until I send back your spirit that has wandered through so many forms and so many ages. You shall rest from life like the setting sun in the west, but you shall dawn again in the east as the first rays of Amon Ra dispel the shadows." The lines suggest the Book of the Dead's instructions for navigating the perilous journey of the soul to the other world as well as its rebirth. Also, the film identifies Imhotep as high priest at the temple of Karnak, sacred to Amon (or Amen)-Ra, so the allusion to this greatest of Egyptian gods is appropriate. But Imhotep's love is typical of the doomed love story of the New Age film: he and Helen are on irreconcilable levels of being.

Balderston intended to make the reincarnation theme even more prominent. According to Brunas, Brunas, and Weaver, the original script had flashbacks with Helen as an eighteenth-century lady in the



French court, a thirteenth-century Englishwoman, an eighth-century Saxon princess, and a Roman lady during the days of the empire. But even though Balderston imagined a meditation on eternal love and the nature of the soul, a topic common to films about reincarnation, Universal Studios wanted a horror film, so the scenes were cut.<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, *The Mummy* was to be reincarnated many times, albeit with a different hero in the first five films, reborn in such Universal Studios double-feature fare as *The Mummy's Hand* (1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944), *The Mummy's Curse* (also 1944), and even *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy* (1955). The devoted hero/villain Imhotep is replaced by Kharis, who became a stablemate of the monster crew at Universal rather than the rather Byronic hero/villain of the original. But even Imhotep gets another lifetime in the special effects-rich 1999 Stephen Sommers film *The Mummy* and the 2001 sequel *The Mummy Returns*, once again seeking his lost princess. Most of the Mummy films establish the love-across-the-ages theme, but the reincarnation and doomed love issues are most satisfyingly worked out in the original film.

#### ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE . . . THE '60S: FOCUS ON *ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER* AND *BIRTH*

Produced soon after the birth of the Age of Aquarius, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) today seems a charmingly muddled mixture of musical, screwball comedy, and New Age doctrine hot from the forge of the 1960s, along with another doomed love story. The film is a voyage in nostalgia for those who lived during those days. It also epitomizes the cultural divide that developed as the Age of Aquarius began, reflecting new directions in spiritual exploration as well as a slightly different take on the eternal love theme in films about reincarnation.

Morey Bernstein's *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, published in 1956, and the resultant intense interest in hypnotic regression no doubt influenced the story line for the film and musical. Bernstein describes his study of hypnosis, which led him to become a self-taught hypnotherapist and later to develop his theories of reincarnation therapy. In 1952, he hypnotized Virginia Tighe, the twenty-nine-year-old wife of a Colorado businessman, taking her to a previous life as Bridey Murphy, a nineteenth-century Irish woman. Under hypnosis, Tighe spoke in an Irish brogue and recalled people and events. Bernstein recorded the sessions and described them in his book. *The Search for Bridey Murphy* became a best seller, sparking a movie as

well as radio and TV shows with hypnotists age regressing people on air.

The book spawned a tide of controversy, with highly vocal debunkers as well as advocates. A newspaper claimed that Tighe had lived next door to a woman named Bridey Murphy Corkell as a child and that the stories she told were probably imbedded in her subconscious and derived from Corkell. Moreover, no one ever found evidence of a Bridey Murphy in Ireland. But interest in age regression persists, and Bernstein no doubt caused many to believe in reincarnation.

*On a Clear Day*, released in 1970 but based on a Broadway musical by J. Allan Lerner first staged in 1965, is close enough to the days of the Bridey Murphy controversy to seem a late addition to the debate. The film exploits the reincarnation love-across-the-ages theme through the story of Daisy Gamble (Barbra Streisand) who, except for periodic outburst of song, seems a rather conventional miniskirted kookie girl from the 1970s' movies of that ilk. Daisy takes her five-pack-a-day smoking habit to medical school professor Dr. Chabot (Yves Montand) for hypnosis therapy, introducing the Bridey Murphy-style age-regression theme as well as a psychic plot.

Chabot discovers more than a nicotine habit when he hypnotizes Daisy: specifically, a previous life as Melinda, a nineteenth-century British woman with psychic abilities who had married an older man for money, managed to get him to divorce her, and then married a younger one whom she enriches through her powers. The reincarnation theme offers a truly interesting romantic conflict in *On a Clear Day*. Chabot is the doubter conventional in the occult film and has to be convinced that Melinda had been a living person. But during his sessions with Melinda as she speaks through Daisy's body, he not only becomes convinced that Melinda had lived but falls in love with the departed woman. These scenes lead to a good many tuneful moments from both Montand and Streisand as the film exploits reincarnation, not only as a love story but also as a tale of doomed love.

How can this issue be resolved? Daisy has grown beyond her fiancé and is now in love with Chabot. Then she discovers tapes with her speaking as Melinda under hypnosis and sings, "He wasn't interested in ME. He was interested in ME." The situation demonstrates the reincarnation theme's potential for dramatic conflict. Daisy is jealous of herself, in a manner of speaking. She refuses to be hypnotized again because, she says, "You're not going to go on using my head for a motel." Chabot's love for Melinda is doomed—at least for this lifetime, as the film suggests, because with reincarnation, after all, they will always have forever.

Other films adapting the reincarnation theme range from the artistically satisfying to the intellectually offensive, but all focus on the power of love over death. *Birth* (2004), another doomed love story, offers a multiple-choice ending that leaves the reincarnation theme in doubt. At the outset, Sean dies while jogging. When the film flashes forward ten years, Sean's widow Anna (Nicole Kidman) is engaged to marry Joseph (Danny Huston). Complications arise when a ten-year-old boy (Cameron Bright) arrives at a dinner party in Anna's apartment to announce that he is the reincarnated Sean. The boy's lines all express the endless love theme. "I'm Sean," he says, "and I love Anna. And nothing's going to change that. That's forever." He sounds convincing. And gradually, despite her doubts, Anna begins to believe him.

The entire situation is wildly improbable. At one point, Sean gets into Anna's apartment while she is bathing, strips, and gets in the tub with her. We're pretty close to statutory rape here, and if the sex roles were reversed, the scene could not have been shot. Anna even states the obvious, asking the boy how he is going to support her (he says he'll get a job) and "how are you going to fulfill my needs" (no response there). But Anna actually plans to run away from home with her supposedly reincarnated husband until a plot twist at the end casts doubt on whether young Sean is really the deceased Sean in a new body. In a letter after they have parted, Sean says goodbye with "Well, I guess I'll see you in another lifetime." We're left with a multiple-choice ending. But the endless love and doomed love plots of the reincarnation theme dominate the film.

"BUY NOW, PAY FOREVER, IT'S THE KARMA CREDIT PLAN":

*AUDREY ROSE, DEAD AGAIN, FLATLINERS, THE REINCARNATION OF PETER PROUD AND MY LIFE*

If not for the conflict between parents of the reincarnated child, *Audrey Rose* (1977), based on Frank De Felitta's 1975 novel, would seem like a docudrama on reincarnation. The premise is that Ivy (Susan Swift), the eleven-year-old daughter of Bill and Janice Templeton (John Beck and Marsha Mason), has horrible nightmares. Elliot Hoover (Anthony Hopkins), who has stalked the Templetons, claims that Ivy is really the reincarnation of Audrey Rose, his child, who had perished along with his wife when their car was run off the road and burst into flames, with the child burning to death.

The drama of the film involves the conflict between the Templetons and Hoover's assertions. But in the process of trying to persuade them of his case, Hoover gives the audience the textbook argument

for reincarnation. He has learned of his daughter's rebirth from psychics, more or less by accident, and clues had led him to the Templeton home. But before that, he had spent years in India: "I came to know the reality of their [Hindus'] religious convictions and the truth of reincarnation," he tells the Templetons.<sup>44</sup> As he continues his story, he tells them that Audrey Rose was reborn as Ivy just two minutes after her death. He says that Ivy is "in mortal danger. . . . As long as a soul is unprepared to accept the laws and responsibilities of its karma, it cannot exist in the Earth life, and it cannot exist in this Earth realm. It has to go back. . . . Quite simply, Mrs. Templeton, my daughter's soul returned too early." The conflict between Elliot Hoover and Bill Templeton boils down to a testosterone-fueled male spitting match. Templeton is the conventional doubter character. The film enacts the usual plotline to lead the viewer to belief through what Tudorov calls "The *reader's hesitation*," which is "the first condition of the fantastic."<sup>45</sup> We hesitate between Templeton's scornful rejection and Hoover's beliefs, with Janice Templeton's gradual acceptance of Hoover's ideas leading to the audience's suspension of disbelief.

Adrian Schrober finds in *Audrey Rose* "a certain tension between reincarnation and [demonic] possession" and an attempt to meld Eastern philosophy with Christian beliefs about damnation: "the notion of an afterlife in resurrection with multiple afterlives in reincarnation" resulting in "Historic Puritan America meets Roman Catholic and New Age America."<sup>46</sup> Schrober interprets the fire imagery as suggesting a Christian Hell. The multiple lectures on reincarnation and Audrey Rose's condition, however, certainly privilege an Eastern point of view rather than Christian doctrines about the afterlife. The film clearly advocates an acceptance of Audrey/Ivy's karma problem. When Hoover is arrested and tried for kidnapping Ivy, an Indian holy man testifies for him, defending the truth of Hoover's beliefs. He describes death as "a momentary separation, a fragile separation in the astro cosmos, where the soul must wait and through meditation seek to clothe itself in the higher spiritual garments before attempting rebirth." He follows with a quotation from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Audrey Rose had only begun to feel spiritual awareness, says Hoover, and her death had been so traumatic that her soul had missed its karmic destiny, returning before its time. The film ends with a Bridey Murphy-style age-regression scene for Ivy by a court-appointed psychiatrist, which proves to be fatal to the child as she relives her most recent death. Apparently she has redressed her karmic issues, however. Mrs. Templeton's letter to Hoover at the end expresses hope that Audrey/Ivy's soul will "mend itself and find peace and fulfill-

ment in Heaven, and that the day will come when her soul will feel free and be able to seek a new rebirth.”

Max Ehrlich's novel *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* (1974) also focuses on reincarnation and karma. The 1975 film of the same title was billed as a horror movie, but it hardly deserves that designation. Nor does it have as many lectures on reincarnation as does the novel. Director J. Lee Thompson must have thought the film's adaptation of its rather thought-provoking source needed sprucing up, so he added a good many nude and graphic sex scenes to compensate. But the outlines of the novel remain.

Peter Proud (Michael Sarrazin) is a history professor at a California university, leading a comfortable life; but he has recurrent dreams that suggest a past existence. Then when he recognizes buildings from his dreams in an unnamed town in Massachusetts while watching a TV documentary, he becomes convinced that the dreams come from a previous life. He visits a parapsychologist, Sam Goodman (Paul Hecht), and asks him if he believes in reincarnation. Goodman answers, “Nobody's ever proved it. Nobody ever disproved it. . . . I've read somewhere that over a billion people believe it, including some of our best minds. Ben Franklin believed it, Voltaire, Thoreau, Gandhi.”

Eventually Goodman suggests the visions are prenatal memory from a previous lifetime, and Peter goes in search of the town of his dreams, driving throughout Massachusetts before he recognizes buildings in Springfield, his home in another life. When he calls Goodman, the psychologist gives us the only real clue to the events of the film and why they have to happen in the occult film's conventional lecture. The story is all about karma: “Those who were closely related in one lifetime had to meet in other lifetimes. If the relationship was one of love, then the love persists. If one of enmity, then the enmity must be overcome. If one of enmity, then the obligation must be met.” The lines are nearly a direct quotation from the same character in the novel.

And so it goes in the film. Peter finds that in another life he was a wicked man named Jeffrey Curtis, husband of Marcia Curtis, the woman in his dreams (Margot Kidder); and after years of his philandering and brutal behavior to her, including a rape, she had killed him. But Peter has fallen in love with Ann Curtis (Jennifer O'Neill), Jeffrey and Marsha's daughter, a difficult problem since in another life he had been her father. The novel skirts this matter, with Peter chastely in love with the girl, but the film includes their love's consummation as one of its many graphic sex scenes.

Both novel and film use the reincarnation theme to create an inter-

esting conflict and another doomed love story—that of a man being in love with the child from his previous life. Like the Ehrlich novel, the film stays true to the laws of karma. Peter dies in the same way at the end of both novel and film as he did in his previous life, supporting Ehrlich's lecture on karma: if the relationship is "one of enmity, then the obligation must be met."

Shirley MacLaine's definition of soul mates echoes the common wisdom of the New Age. Certain souls "were actually created for one another at the beginning of time, what you call the moment of the 'Big Bang.' They vibrate at exactly the same electromagnetic frequency because they are identical counterparts of one another."<sup>47</sup> John Lash describes the soul mate concept in much the same terms: "Someone ideally suited to be a companion in the sharing of the [sic] one's development, both spiritual and personal; often believed to have been an intimate companion in former lives."<sup>48</sup> The concept reflects the endless love theme. And what could be more romantic?

*Dead Again* adapts karma and reincarnation issues for much better dramatic effect than does *Audrey Rose* or *Reincarnation of Peter Proud* and with a good dollop of dry irony. It is also one of the most imaginative adaptations of the love-across-the-ages and soul mate versions of the reincarnation theme and dramatizes a love affair that is not doomed to fail but perhaps fated to succeed. At the opening, P.I. Mike Church (Kenneth Branagh) takes on the job of finding the identity of a mute, amnesia-stricken woman (Emma Thompson). Franklyn Madson (Derek Jacobi), an eccentric hypnotist and antiques dealer, offers to hypnotize her to bring back her memory, but also takes her to a past life through age regression where we see her as Margaret, a gifted pianist who falls in love with and marries Roman Strauss, a composer who escaped from Germany in World War II and who looks a lot like Mike Church. Roman tells her that they are "two halves of the same person"—soul mates.

The film reveals Margaret and Roman's marriage in bits and pieces through individual sessions with Madson. Meanwhile, Church has fallen in love with Amanda Sharp, which, as we later learn, is our amnesiac's real name: a pun, no doubt, on the implement used in Margaret's murder and the tool of justice at the end. Mike has met a dropout psychiatrist, Cozy Carlisle (a choice bit part for Robin Williams), whom he had tracked down to give him an inheritance; and he takes Amanda to him for help. At this point, we get a lecture on reincarnation, with Cozy serving as the New Age voice in the film. He tells them, "There's a lot more people on this planet who believe in past lives than don't . . . sometimes a trauma in a present life can lead you back to a trauma in a past life. You take what you learn in this life

and use it in the next. That's karma." Amanda asks, "What good is in learning anything if you're going to be with different people each time?" Cozy replies, "You're not going to be with different people. Thanks to fate, the only cosmic force with a tragic sense of humor, you burn somebody in one life, they get a chance to burn you in this one. It's the karma credit plan: buy now, pay forever."

Cozy's advice frames the plot, as Mike discovers when he lets Madison age regress him. In the past life he shared with Margaret/Amanda, he sees himself, or rather herself, in a mirror and discovers that he and Margaret have switched sex roles. When Mike consults Cozy, he's told, "This gender switching shit happens all the time. You can be Bob in one life and Betty in the next. You can be husband in one life and wife in the next." Cozy believes in fate and a cycle of events, so he suggests that Mike kill Grace because "karmically, self-defense is quite cool."

Actually, Cozy's lines seem a script error, as the advice contradicts what he had earlier said about the "karma credit plan," which works out quite nicely in the film. The karma theme leads to a sensational ending with Margaret's killer being hoist by his own petard quite literally, getting karmic justice when he falls on a larger version of the instrument he had used in the murder. And appropriately for a film about soul mates, the love between Amanda/Margaret and Mike/Roman, whatever their gender, is forever.

Karmic justice is also a major theme in *Flatliners* (1990), a film that spins off of the near-death experience (NDE) research first published by Raymond Moody but now so widespread in popular culture that references to parts of it are de rigueur in film. Moody finds that those who "flatline" (i.e., die on the operating table but are resuscitated) commonly experience "some or all of the following events: a sense of being dead, peace and painlessness even during a 'painful' experience, bodily separation, entering a dark region or tunnel, rising rapidly to the heavens, meeting deceased friends and relatives who are bathed in light, encountering a Supreme Being, reviewing one's life, and feeling reluctance to return to the world of the living."<sup>49</sup>

*Flatliners* focuses on issues of karma rather than reincarnation. Directed by Joel Schumacher, the film has a splendid cast of young talent and future star power: Julia Roberts, Kiefer Sutherland, Kevin Bacon, Oliver Platt, and Alex Baldwin. Jan de Bont, who would go on to direct *The Haunting* and the two *Speed* movies, is the cinematographer and possibly the talent responsible for the eerie look of this interesting film.

*Flatliners* introduces a group of medical students. An opening scene shows Rachel (Roberts) interviewing patients who have had near-

death experiences. A woman who had lost her baby and had been technically dead on the operating table tells her: "Even though I was in a coma, I saw myself, light above, looking down. Ralph, my husband, was crying because the doctor said I was dying. . . . Then I started to float into this tunnel toward the light. It was the most beautiful light I ever saw, and I heard a voice. And it was the most beautiful voice I ever heard, and it said, 'I'm going to take your baby. But you are going back.'" Her story is the lecture element of the occult film that establishes the frame for the plot, in which a group of students find a way of flatlining (being medically dead) and then returning. Why? "Quite simply," Nelson (Sutherland), one of the students, says, "to see if there's anything out there beyond death. Philosophy failed. Religion failed. Now it's up to medical science." They use an old church at night that is under renovations and offers opportunities for symbolic images of statues and other artwork that mutely comment on the proceedings.

Each student's life issues guide the karmic theme of the film and their experience on the Other Side. Nelson, whose obsessive behavior signals his emotional problems, sees a child to whom he had done great wrong in his boyhood. Joe (Baldwin), who has lied and cheated to seduce women and even videotaped their love-making sessions, has visions of these women and their body parts on the Other Side. Rachel (Roberts) sees her home where her father had killed himself. And Labraccio (Bacon) sees Winnie Hicks, a little girl whom he and others had teased unmercifully in grade school.

The problem is that each brings something back from their NDE. When he returns, Nelson reports, "I can hear a kind of dragging sound. I not only hear it; I can feel it." Rachel continues to see visions of her father, including one in which he kills himself. Everywhere he goes, Joe sees visions of women who accuse him of perfidy. Labraccio sees Winnie Hicks as a child, who follows and verbally abuses him. But Nelson suffers most. Billy, a boy for whose death he feels responsible, has come back and tracks him down wherever he goes, beating him unmercifully.

It's all about karma, they decide. They fulfill one of the conventions of the occult film, the cautionary tale, in paying a price for their experiment. Their experience on the Other Side forces them to atone for misdeeds on this side. As Nelson says on his return, "Somehow we brought our sins back physically, and they're pissed." Joe loses his fiancée, whom he honestly loved, when she finds videos of his sexual encounters. Labraccio is able to confront his karma on this side when he tracks down the grown-up Winnie Hicks, apologizes, and earns her forgiveness. "You were a little shy," he says, "and I was a real jerk.



I just wanted to say I'm sorry. . . . However we made you feel, it was wrong." As Steckle (Platt) says, "Young Dr. Dave thinks he's solved our karma problem. Atonement, gentlemen."

The most interesting karmic resolution comes for Rachel. Blue light consistently bathes the church and sometimes other settings, apparently symbolizing the world of the living. The Other Side is brilliantly colored but not in any special hue. Red signals a visit from Rachel's father. When he visits her for the last time, with the scene bathed in the familiar red, she sees the skull tattoo on his arm from the 101st Airborne in Vietnam as he injects himself with drugs. He turns to her and says, "Sweetheart, forgive me." They embrace, and the red light fades to gold, suggesting an ascent from Hell. In Rachel's case, it wasn't her karma that had to be worked out. Like Nelson, she brings back a departed spirit. But the atonement is not hers: it is her father's.

Nelson's punishment is most severe. His telephone conversation with Rachel telling her he's going to the Other Side by himself sums up the film's point about karma. When Rachel tries to reassure him about his experience with Billy and says "None of that matters now," Nelson responds, "Everything matters! Everything we do matters!" In brief, the film enacts New Age beliefs about karma. In MacLaine's words, "For every act, for every indifference, for every misuse of life, we are held accountable. And it is up to us to understand what those accounts might be."<sup>50</sup>

*My Life* (1993) also focuses on an individual getting his karma together. Bruce Joel Rubin, who apparently specialized in films that develop New Age topics, such as *Ghost* and *Jacob's Ladder* (both discussed in this book), wrote and directed the film, and unlike so many occult films, his scripts do not include the usual cautionary tale warning against using the occult. While the word "karma" is never actually spoken, the film shows that Bob Jones (Michael Keaton), a highly successful public relations executive, needs to improve his. He has cancer, with a very bad prognosis. Also, he is consumed by anger against his working-class family. With a baby on the way, he begins shooting videotape of himself, giving all sorts of advice to this unborn child, pretty obviously hiding behind the video camera to avoid real involvement with people. His wife, Gail (Nicole Kidman) feels that he won't let her into his feelings,

Gail insists that he see a Chinese healer who has helped the husband of a friend, and Bob reluctantly agrees. The healer's approach reflects New Age beliefs, and the sessions propel the message of the film on karma. The practitioner passes his hands over Bob's body as he lies on the examination table, not touching him, but feeling his

aura<sup>51</sup> and locating the tumors, which he knew nothing about. He also correctly diagnoses Bob's anger and pain and provides the lecture element of the plot: "Do you want to carry so much pain into your next life? . . . The last second of your life is the most important moment of all. It's everything you are, ever said, ever thought, all rolled into one. That is the seed of the next life. Until the last moment, you still have time. You can let go of your fear, you can let go of your anger."

Bob is the doubter character. But during his treatments, he sees a burst of light. When he asks about it, the healer gives him a New Age answer: "That is the light of self. It is the source of life, the source of all healing." When Bob asks if his visions mean he's defeating his disease, though, the healer tells him that the tumors are growing too fast. In effect, he tells Bob to mend his karma. "Put your house in order. Find peace."

The film turns into a three-hanky job as Gail has Bob's baby and Bob's cancer worsens. But Bob has clearly improved his karma. On one of his last days, he manages to get to his baby's crib and whispers to him, "Dying's a really hard way to learn about life . . . Boy, I'm so glad to have had the time with you, cause it's the happiest I've ever been." Then in the final scene of the film, his soul passes into the burst of light he'd seen earlier, yet another filmic version of Moody's description of the death experience.

#### ANCIENT OF AGE AND NEW AGE: PSYCHICS AND CLAIRVOYANTS IN FILM: *THE CLAIRVOYANT*, *THE GIFT*, *FEAR*, *BLACK RAINBOW*, *SIMON THE MAGICIAN*, *THE FURY*, AND *POWDER*

What if you knew what was going to happen tomorrow or could make things happen that transcend physical laws? Clairvoyance (the former) and psychokinesis (the latter) are important patterns in the whole cloth of the New Age movement. They are obviously related to the occult because in the tradition, the clairvoyant reveals what is hidden from the rest of us. They also fit the pattern of transcendence so characteristic of New Age ideas, as those who are seers or who practice psychokinesis transcend time, space, and physical laws.

The tradition of prophecy is as ancient as recorded history and as new as the New Age: from ancient Greece with the Delphic Oracle and Tiresias, the blind prophet from *Oedipus the King* and the *Odyssey*, to Nostradamus, to Edgar Cayce, to astrologers, and to the countless psychic fairs held across the United States today. Some New Age writers explain psychics' gift as the ability to tune into the "Akashic Record," described by Campbell and Brennan as "an area

of the astral plane which carries the imprint of everything that has ever happened” or will happen.<sup>52</sup> From the number of people who make their living reading the cards, or palms, or stars, as well as the millions who patronize these seers, it seems obvious that many people are either believers in or at least interested observers of psychic phenomena.

Moreover, clairvoyance and psychokinesis offer great possibilities for stories and film scripts. These films usually include the cautionary tale plot common to many, if not most, occult films, a theme that reflects society’s uneasiness about the occult: either those who possess such gifts must suffer from them or the result of the psychic’s prediction causes some kind of harm. Actually, Sophocles established the agony of prophecy in *Oedipus the King* in the fifth century BC, when Oedipus calls on Tiresias to name the killer of King Laius. However, Tiresias understands that Oedipus, now king, had killed Laius without knowing that he was committing both regicide and patricide, and says, “How horrible—to see the truth, when the truth is only pain to him who sees!” So it goes in most films about psychics.

Clairvoyance and the cautionary tale theme appear early in the history of film, as in *The Clairvoyant* (1935), in which Maximus (Claude Rains) operates a phony psychic act with his wife Renée (Fay Wray). Then he suddenly gets real psychic visions, but only when in the presence of Christine (Jane Baxter), the daughter of a powerful newspaper publisher. Things go well for Maximus for a time, but then the cautionary tale element of the plot kicks in. Renée leaves him, jealous of his time with Christine. His mother dies, saying on her deathbed, “that gift he has, it’s no good. He must give it up.” Then in an extension of the cautionary tale element, he foresees events that people don’t want to hear about and ends up in trouble with the law. Thus, most of the key elements of the clairvoyant plot appear in this early film on the subject.

In many films about psychics from the New Age era, the psychic either works with police to tune into the mind of a criminal or finds the bodies of victims, a plotline that has been used over and over and which magnifies the cautionary tale element. Sensational media stories about psychics helping police have probably contributed to the popularity of this plotline. As in nearly all films about psychics, the clairvoyant sleuth suffers because of his or her gift. An added feature that complements this cautionary tale is some sort of psychic link between sleuth and killer. *Fear* (1990) and *In Dreams* (1999) are but two examples of such films.

In *Fear*, Cacey Bridges (Ally Sheedy—the character’s name is no doubt an allusion to Edgar Cayce) is a college girl whose gift of psy-

chometry (the ability to tell something about people by handling an object they have touched) enables her to help police save a young woman about to be butchered by a serial killer. The story fast forwards four years to find her now a successful author who has aided police to catch other serial killers and has published three books about her experiences, only to become the victim of a serial murderer who is psychic. He gets into her mind, making her watch his killing to excite fear, which is his turn-on. "I give great fear," she tells the police, and she suffers for her gift.

*In Dreams* (1999) works out a similar cautionary tale plot. Tales of psychic knowledge gained from dreams date to earliest times. In this film, the psychic does not work with police, but she does eliminate a killer and must suffer for her gift. Claire Cooper (Annette Bening) has dreams in which she sees the spot where a child who has been abducted was murdered. The police refuse to believe her (another convention of films about psychics, with the authorities as the doubters), and when the murderer (Robert Downey, Jr.) learns about her, he snatches Claire's daughter Rebecca after a school play and kills her, another example of the psychic suffering for her gift. All this leads to a sensational ending in which Claire confronts the killer, and a New Age-style death scene results, reuniting Claire and her daughter in the spirit world. As the light appears for the dying Claire, so does the spirit of Rebecca, who says, "Come with me." "Where, darling?" asks Claire. "Home," replies her daughter, and they go into the light.

So it goes in *The Gift* (2000), one of the better psychic sleuth films. *The Gift* develops the clairvoyant theme with a touch of southern gothic in yet another murder mystery plot in which Annie Wilson (Cate Blanchett), who has the psychic gift, suffers for it. She is a single mom in a southern town who supports her children by being the local soothsayer (she gives readings from cards), but she's also a good counselor. She offends Donnie Barksdale (Keanu Reeves) when she counsels his wife to leave him after he beats her repeatedly. He threatens Annie with violence and says, "You ain't no better'n a Jew or a Nigger. . . . Messin' with the Devil's gonna get you burned." When a young woman disappears, Annie has visions of her body. The police in the psychics plot are usually the doubters of the occult film. But they finally act on her information, finding the body, and blaming Barksdale. All this leads to Annie's confrontation with the real killer who nearly succeeds in murdering her. Again, the gift of foreknowledge proves to bring pain to the one who holds it.

*Black Rainbow* (1989), a well-made "B" movie with a mixed message about the Other Side, is one of the best of the psychic subgenre. The film continues the theme of damage done to those with psychic

powers and the psychic's use of those powers to find criminals. Martha and Walter Travis (Rosanna Arquette and Jason Robards) are a father/daughter team who fleece the rubes in southern towns by pretending to bring messages from the dead. "I'm only God's instrument, a telephone exchange for those spirits who want to connect with their folks here on Earth," Martha tells them. Then she begins to get real visions of disaster to loved ones of people in the audience and can't keep from reporting them. The onset of a psychic gift for a character who had not previously had it is one of the plot devices of these films, as we see in *Ghost*, *The Clairvoyant*, *A Stir of Echoes*, and others. Another convention is a genetic link for this ability. In *Black Rainbow*, Martha inherited hers from her long-deceased mother.

The film has good dramatic mix: the conflict between exploitative father and abused daughter; the dilemma of the psychic articulated so well by Tiresias in *Oedipus the King*; a professional killer, tracking Martha because he fears she has seen him in her visions; and of course plenty of sensationalism. But the alienation and pain of the psychic take center stage in the film. Martha tries to convince her father that her visions are real: "When I go on stage each night, I look at the audience and feel their pain. I see their mangled bodies drained of blood. . . . It haunts me, and its getting worse." A minister she meets on a train reinforces this theme. When they strike up a conversation and he learns that she is a medium, he asks whether she is a psychic. When she lies and says she is not, he replies, "Be grateful. That's dangerous territory. We steal if we touch tomorrow. It is God's."

For the most part *Black Rainbow* shows organized religion to be the realm of charlatans. A Bible-thumping preacher exhorts a crowd awaiting news of casualties outside after a plant explosion that Martha had predicted. The owner of the chemical plant who hires the hit man is a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher as a sideline. Also, a woman who had been at Martha's performance when she predicted the deaths at the plant explosion accosts her angrily as she awaits news of her son and says, "If we didn't believe in all that crap about the hereafter, maybe we'd pay some attention to what's going on here." And Martha tells her father in lines that explain the film's title, "I don't see 'over there' at the end of the rainbow any longer. Instead, I see wasting disease, cancer, symptoms of our own self-destruction."

At her last performance Martha brings news, apparently sincerely, from deceased loved ones to those in her audience about the beauties of the Other Side, accounts that sound a good deal like those from New Age Spiritualists. As a kind of throw-in bit of poetic justice, Walt Travis, an alcoholic who has exploited his daughter throughout her life and squandered her share of their money, sees what is appar-

ently an out-of-body vision of Martha, just as the killer shoots him. Martha has fainted on stage when she "sees" her father's death. When she awakens, Martha tells the reporter that she'd had a vision of Walt seeing her astral projection before he dies. "He never knew if it was a dream."

*Simon the Magician*, a 1999 French film, offers an interesting spin on the psychic sleuth plot and an even more dramatic portrayal of the psychic's alienation. Summoned to Paris from his native Hungary to help solve a murder, Simon (Péter Andorai), a world-weary and alienated psychic, has a problem. He speaks no French beyond "oui" and "non." He communicates through an interpreter and quickly solves the crime in New Age fashion by perceiving that the plants in the apartment where the crime took place would know who committed violence. So he has them wired with a gadget to show their emotional state, then brings all of the possible suspects before them; and when the perpetrator appears, the plants' emotional distress sets off the alarm. The scene refers to experiments by lie detector pioneer Cleve Backster, who wired a polygraph to a plant in his lab and stimulated a response by thinking of touching a match to its leaves, suggesting not only the plant's sentience but ESP.<sup>53</sup>

Simon stays on in Paris, fascinated with Jeanne (Julie Delarme), a beautiful young girl he sees on the street. After helping her by psychically calming a security guard who harasses her, he manages to make her acquaintance but doesn't tell her that he doesn't understand a word she says, sprinkling his conversation randomly with "oui" and "non," usually in the wrong places when she chatters on.

The plot also has a sort of grudge match between Simon and a rival magician who feels threatened by Simon's fame, eventually ending in Simon agreeing to a contest involving survival of a three-day burial. We also have characters named Peter and Paul, and Paul wants to be Simon's disciple ("I want to know the meaning of life," Paul requests). The three days underground represent the same period before Christ left the tomb. The verbal pun of one psychic named Simon and the other named Peter (the two comprising the full name of St. Peter) is amusing. The name Simon might also allude to the biblical Simon Magus ("the magician") who tried to get magical powers from the disciples, as described in Acts 8:9–24, including Peter. Legends of Simon Magus's exploits abound, including one describing an exhibition of flying he gave before the Emperor Nero but was made to fall by St. Peter, and another that tells of his death when he bragged he could survive a three-day burial (as in the film), but died in the attempt, a legend not lost on the scriptwriter for *Simon the Magician* as a useful allusion to Christ's three days in the tomb.<sup>54</sup> The Christian

symbolism is interesting from a New Age perspective, but it fails to add up to much.

The film is also a romance, and in a charming scene with Simon and Jeanne in a telephone booth, unable to communicate, Simon calls his interpreter at the French Sûreté to translate his feelings to Jeanne by telephone. Simon and Jeanne pass the telephone receiver back and forth for translations as love blooms, with Jeanne finally realizing why Simon had seemed so strange. Simon's inability to speak French symbolizes the psychic's inability to translate the transcendent experiences that come to him or her and the alienation of those with this gift.

Not all films about psychics involve sleuthing. The theme also lends itself to the basic thriller or horror plot, without the psychic detective. Brian de Palma's *The Fury* (1978), based on a novel by John Farris, continues the cautionary tale theme in films about psychics, combining, as many such films do, psychokinetic powers in parallel with those of clairvoyance. The film begins with the kidnapping of Robin (Andrew Stevens), son of Peter Sandza (Kirk Douglas), an operative for the evil, shadowy government intelligence agency endemic to Hollywood thrillers. The action part of the film has Peter trying to regain his son, who has been taken to the Paragon Institute, a special school for children with psychic talents where they are trained to become weapons. At the school, Robin meets Gillian Bellaver (Amy Irving), who is similarly talented and hates her gift. She establishes the conventional situation of the psychic when she tells Dr. McKeever, the director, "It's not a gift. It's more like having a bad tooth and never knowing when it's going to hurt."

Carol Clover suggests that *The Fury* develops a demonic possession plot, with the government agent Ben Childress (John Cassavetes), "whose evil plots and glowing eyes . . . mark him as Satan on earth," as the source of possession for Gillian, while his associate Hester corrupts Robin.<sup>55</sup> The occult elements of the film are closer to the New Age than the demonic, however, with conventional perspectives on psychics. Scenes in the Paragon Institute show the students viewing cards, with Gillian knowing which card another student was shown without seeing it. Institute director McKeever articulates a theory of clairvoyance: "Telepathy is a timeless form of communication. . . . But the older and more sophisticated we become, the more we rationalize what our senses try to tell us." But novelist and scriptwriter John Farris throws in a load of New Age occult explanation for psychic powers. McKeever tells Gillian that there is "a part of the mind you've never used before [that] becomes sensitized . . . to the bioplasmic universe. In that universe is a record of every human impulse, word, and

deed of lives past and lives to come. Occasionally, you make a connection between the timeless world and the physical world. You have what clairvoyants call a vision." McKeever's lines provide the lecture, which seems an allusion to the Akashic Record, that establishes the film's frame. The finale completes the cautionary tale element and owes a good deal to *Carrie*, which de Palma had directed two years before. Like the earlier film, the message is that psychic and psychokinetic skills are too dangerous for mere mortals.

*Powder* (1995) is one of the more interesting adaptations of the psychic story line in the New Age film. The plot combines teen alienation and the stranger-in-a-strange-land story line with clairvoyance and psychokinetic incidents, along with a couple of lectures on New Age pantheism and human potential, all without a detective story or a great deal of sensationalism. Jeremy Reed (Sean Patrick Flanery) is a teenage albino, nicknamed Powder because of his ghostlike pallor and raised in seclusion by his grandparents after being rejected by his father during his childhood. There he learns about the world from an excellent library of books. Once his grandparents are dead, he is moved to a home for boys. After he takes a battery of tests, Jessie Caldwell (Mary Steenbergen), the homes' director, learns that his intelligence is off the charts. Moreover, Powder reads minds and demonstrates psychokinetic powers.

The film develops the teen angst theme through Powder's status of an outsider bullied, his sense of being a freak, and his rejection by almost everyone except Ripley, his science teacher, and Lindsay, a pretty girl to whom he is attracted (Missy Crider). Ripley (Jeff Goldblum) discovers that part of Powder's otherness comes from the electrical charge within him that creates electrolysis, preventing hair growing on his body and setting off electrical devices around him. The film provides a weak framing device for Powder's powers. His mother had been hit by lightning when she was in labor and on the way to the hospital. He is, among other things, a walking power battery.

Powder also gives lectures on New Age pantheism, which he applies to the human condition. Lindsay asks him what people are really like inside. He says, "Inside most people, there's a feeling of being separate—and they're not. They're part of absolutely everyone—and everything." When she expresses doubt, Powder tells her that she, like other people, can't see beyond themselves, but if they did, they'd see "how beautiful they are. And that there is no need to hide, or lie . . . or any of the things people use to confuse the truth."

As the holy innocent unspoiled by civilization, a favorite New Age figure, Powder enriches the lives of others. He brings closure to the



terminally ill wife of Doug, the local sheriff (Lance Henriksen), saves the life of the bully who persecuted him, and offers new appreciation of life to others. But like most psychics in film, he remains a stranger in a strange land, a Christ figure, who at the end runs toward the lightning, arms in crucifixion position, to become part of “absolutely everyone—and everything.” Ripley, who repeatedly quotes Einstein on the permanence of energy, says to Powder at one point, “if we ever get to the point where we could use all of our brain, we’d be pure energy . . . you are closer to that energy level than anyone has ever been.” Powder’s exit from this world to become part of all matter brings joy to those who had loved him.

With a few notable exceptions such as *The Shining*, Stephen King’s films have failed to live up to the popularity of his novels. But many of them follow the basic psychic plot. In *Carrie* (1976), the title character has the “gift” of psychokinesis and not only suffers for it herself but makes the school bullies pay in a teen film orgy of poetic justice. *The Dead Zone* (1983) and *Fire Starter* (1984) are other examples, and in one of the best film adaptations of King’s work, little Danny Torrance and Dick Hallorann are fellow psychics in *The Shining*. All the characters in these films pay the price for their gift.

“OH NATURE, EVER LOVELY, EVER NEW . . .” : FOCUS ON GAIA  
IN *FINAL FANTASY*, *FERN GULLEY*, *PRINCESS MONONOKE*,  
*MEDICINE MAN*, *DANCES WITH WOLVES*, *SILENT RUNNING*,  
*NELL*, AND *A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*

In the concluding lines of her poem “St. Monica,” eighteenth-century Romantic British poet Charlotte Smith writes:

Oh Nature! ever lovely, ever new,  
He whom his earliest vows have paid to you  
Still finds, that life has something to bestow,  
And while to dark Forgetfulness they go,  
Man, and the works of man; immortal Youth,  
Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth,  
Your Heaven-indited volume will display,  
While Art’s elaborate monuments decay. . . .<sup>56</sup>

Smith’s lines seem a synthesis of the Romantic view of nature that was aborning in England during her time, culminating in the writings of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For the Romantic poets, nature, both physical and human, are superior to art, or the

products of civilization. That view of nature has evolved into a fundamental part of the Gaia concept in New Age thinking.

In Greek mythology, Gaia is a primal cosmic goddess who becomes the goddess of Earth (Mother Earth) and gives birth to the generation of Earth gods and goddesses, beginning with the Titans, through her union with Father Sky. Scientists have given the name "Gaia hypothesis" to the belief that all living things are interconnected and interdependent, making the planet a self-regulating entity. Scientist James Lovelock's pioneering work has led to much interest in Gaia, which he refers to as "a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seems an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet."<sup>57</sup> Rosemary Ellen Guiley gives the topic a New Age spin when she writes that "Gaia, through human technology, has awakened and is aware of herself through the eyes of space cameras" and that "the collective intelligence of humans constitutes a Gaian brain and nervous system that can anticipate environmental changes."<sup>58</sup> The Gaia concept has spiritual as well as political implications that lead us to yet another cultural divide with obvious relevance in our time: the conflict between polluters and Greens and the issue of global warming due to greenhouse gasses.

On the popular level, the Gaia principle translates into a love of nature over the values of civilization, much like the preference of nature over art expressed by Charlotte Smith or William Wordsworth in earlier times. Gaia consciousness is interwoven into most of the spiritual paths of the New Age. Most Wiccans (arguably connected to the New Age but by self-perception—a much older path) revere the Earth Mother as goddess. From a broader perspective, Marilyn Ferguson writes that "we are living in the *change of change*, the time in which we can intentionally align ourselves with nature for rapid re-making of ourselves and our collapsing institutions. . . . The paradigm of the Aquarian Conspiracy sees humankind embedded in nature. It promotes the autonomous individual in a decentralized society. It sees us as stewards of all our resources, inner and outer."<sup>59</sup> While not everyone who is environmentally conscious can be labeled a New Ager, New Age concepts have been an integral element of the Green movement and Gaia thought.

Not all films that celebrate nature can be linked to the New Age, but a few clearly deserve to be so described, especially three Japanese animation films, *Final Fantasy* (2001), *FernGulley* (1992), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). These films demonstrate an important social divi-

sion: they might be labeled as environmentalist propaganda by conservatives but simply as truth by New Age nature enthusiasts.

*Final Fantasy*, a groundbreaking computer-generated animation, specifically celebrates Gaia as a spiritual force. The film establishes an Earth that has been invaded by “phantoms” who seem to have arrived from a meteorite and can literally suck the spirits from humans. People have abandoned the cities and countryside for “Barrier Cities,” enclaves that the phantoms cannot pierce. Aki Ross, a female scientist (the CGI experts were most proud of making individual strands of hair move separately), has mysterious dreams, perhaps resulting from an infection of a phantom into her body that her mentor, Dr. Cid, has somehow contained. Cid’s and Aki’s research has led them to a theory about Gaia and human souls that is redolent of the New Age. Dr. Cid explains it to the New York Barrier City Council in a scene that furnishes the occult film lecture along with a New Age twist: “All life is a form of energy, and each life has spirit. Each new spirit is housed in a physical body. Through their experience on Earth, each spirit matures and grows. When the physical body dies, the mature spirit returns to Gaia, enabling Gaia to mature and grow.”

General Hein, commander of the defense at the New York Barrier, is the typical New Age earth-exploitative villain, a militarist whose German-sounding name symbolizes his Nazi sensibilities and whose phallic-looking “Zeus cannon” suggests male domination over Mother Earth. Ultimately, Cid, Aki, and Captain Gray Edwards, Aki’s sweetheart, discover that the phantoms are “living spirits from an alien world” that had been blown apart by a war Aki saw in her dream, “spirits that are lost, confused, and angry.” The film works out the Gaia theme when the spirit of the destroyed planet joins with Earth’s Gaia to restore ecological health.

*Final Fantasy’s* target audience is the under-sixteen crowd, but it has great appeal for those inclined toward New Age ideas. *FernGully, the Last Rain Forest* (1992) also appeals to both youngsters and New Agers. The film is another Japanese animation movie and is set in an idealized rain forest, where it never seems to rain and where tigers never eat lambs. A group of fairies called tree spirits, led by the matriarch Magi Lune, take care of the trees. Young Crysta seems the designated successor, but she likes to play instead of learning her lessons from her mentor. In an earlier time, we learn, Magi had overcome Hexxus, an evil spirit who had upset the balance of nature and killed the humans of the forest, but Magi had called up the “magical power of nature” to imprison him in a tree.

The conflict of the plot develops when humans arrive with a machine (the “leveler”) to clear the forest and to harvest trees. When

Crysta goes above the forest canopy, sees the smoke from the machine, and returns to ask Magi about it, she gets a lecture in which the word Gaia never appears but is clearly assumed: "There are worlds within worlds, Crysta. Everything in our world is connected by the delicate strands of the web of life, which is balanced between forces of destruction and the magic forces of creation. . . . Everyone can call upon the magic power of the web of life. You have to find it in yourself." Later, Magi tells Crysta, "Look for the hero inside yourself, Crysta. Look to the good and loving heart in you and all others. For just as every seed holds the magic power of creation, see it in you and every other creature in the world."

The characters' names suggest Christian symbolism with "Magi" referencing the wise men who visited the baby Jesus and "Crysta" obviously suggesting "Christ;" but the real meaning for a New Age audience might indicate a mother/daughter deity pairing rather than father/son. Magi's philosophy resonates with New Age thought, from the transcendentalist forebears of the New Age movement in the nineteenth century, as in Walt Whitman's "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" in *Song of Myself*, to Marilyn Ferguson's statement that "When one begins the transformative process, death and birth are imminent: the death of custom as authority, the birth of the self,"<sup>60</sup> to "Trust the Force, Luke!"

Crysta goes to the site where the Leveler is cutting trees and meets Zak, a sort of prototype American teen who is working on the project. She uses her magic to shrink him to her size (an allusion perhaps to Charles Kingsley's nineteenth-century novel *Water Babies*), but the addition of the human boy gives the viewer a connection to the fantastic world of the forest. When the humans cut the tree that holds the evil Hexxus in captivity, his spirit possesses the machine, singing "oil and slime, oh you'll love my toxic love." A model polluter, he sings, "I see the world and all the creatures in it. I suck 'em dry and spit 'em out like spinach, 'cause greedy human beings will always lend a hand with the destruction of this worthless jungle land." Crysta must again find the power within herself to use the magic of nature and recapture the evil spirit, with the film providing yet more echoes of "Trust the Force" and the New Age belief in the transcendent power of the self.

*FernGully* leaves no doubt about its message, as the director dedicates the film with text on the final screen to "our children and our children's children." It is indeed a film for children, but its repeated lessons on the delicate web of life that sustains us all and the need to preserve it articulate the New Age Gaia hypothesis. The target audience might not fully understand the concept, but the recurrent

phrases “nature’s magic” and “web of life” are almost certainly intended as synonyms for Gaia.

*Princess Mononoke* (1997), another Japanese animation, also connects nature and spirit. Set in the Japanese Iron Age, the film dramatizes a conflict between nature and industrialization. The opening monologue makes the point: “In ancient times, the land lay covered in forests, where from ages long past dwelt the spirits of the gods.” After many forests were destroyed, the remaining ones were “guarded by gigantic beasts who owed their allegiance to the great forest spirit.”

The plot is perilously close to allegory. Prince Ashitaka, of a tribe thought by many to be extinct, manages to kill a giant boar demon that threatens his village. The boar is covered with a snakelike growth that infects Ashitaka, and the villagers trace the infection to a lump of iron inside the beast. And so the symbolism is set: industrialism, which produces iron, corrupts nature. The incident sets the plot running. The village wise woman casts the stones for prophecy and tells Ashitaka that he will die from the infection. “There is evil in the land to the west,” she says, and tells him his best chance is to meet it head on.

And so it goes. Ashitaka rides to the west and finds a walled, smoky, industrial city ruled by lady Eboshi-gozen. Eboshi’s specialty is making firearms, and she has plans to fell the trees of the forest to feed her furnaces. The city symbolizes industrialization. The wolf god Mora and her human daughter San (formerly Princess Mononoke, before she was adopted as a baby by Mora) do their best to stand up against Eboshi’s onslaughts. Thus, they represent nature. Ashitaka tries to be an intermediary, showing that nature and industrialism can live in balance. When Eboshi attempts to kill the great spirit of the forest, she discovers that nature fights back.

*Princess Mononoke* leaves no doubt about the spirituality of nature. When Ashitaka first enters the forest of the Great Spirit and sees its pristine beauty, he murmurs, “This is magic!” Moreover, the water of the forest heals many injuries, though it only alleviates Ashitaka’s infection. We hear legends that the blood of the Forest Spirit can heal all wounds, which eventually seems to be the case for Ashitaka. And when the head of the boar clan complains that the Forest Spirit does not save those who protect the forest, Moro lectures him, “The Forest Spirit gives life and takes life away. Life and death are his alone.” Finally, at the end of the film when San fears that the Forest Spirit is dead, Ashitaka insists, “Never. He’s life itself, San. He’s here right now, trying to tell us something,” which, the film suggests, is to learn to compromise and let nature and industry exist side by side. Also,

the death and resurrection of the Forest Spirit has obvious parallels with Christianity and other religions. Christine Kraemer sees Ashitaka as a Christlike figure who tries to reconcile the two forces, stepping between San and Eboshi when they fought. He resists anger, and is willing to die for others in a role that "may be recognized cross-culturally as sacred or holy."<sup>61</sup>

The symbolism suggests that industrialism is not evil, just misguided. Lady Eboshi is kind to all of her people, even taking in lepers to work for her. She simply does not understand the consequences of her actions until they nearly destroy her and her city. Eboshi's anger would destroy civilization. But *Princess Mononoke* privileges nature in showing that civilization must protect and adapt to it. Like *Fern-Gulley* and *Final Fantasy*, *Princess Mononoke* demonstrates New Age spirituality and the certainty that nature has awareness and can respond to crisis. Ralph Abraham's words sum up the concept: "The Gaia hypothesis . . . affirms the intelligence of the whole life system of our planet in creating and regulating the physical conditions optimal for the emergence and maintenance of life."<sup>62</sup>

Not all recent ecologically oriented films so clearly demonstrate New Age ideas, but most are at least influenced by them. Few films are so precisely focused on Gaia theory as the Japanese animations. In *A River Runs Through It* (1992), however, director Robert Redford adapts a semiautobiographical Norman Maclean story to create a beautifully filmic statement about nature's transcendent and healing powers: a treatment reminiscent of Wordsworth's Romantic spirituality, which seems particularly timely in the New Age. In the film, Norman Maclean (Craig Sheffer), son of a Presbyterian minister (Tom Skerritt), narrates the story from his old age, reflecting on events from his boyhood in Montana beginning in 1910 through his manhood and marriage. Norman tells us that his father "believed that man by nature was a damned mess and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty." "God's rhythms" are clearly nature's rhythms in the context of the film.

For Norman, his father, and his wild younger brother Paul (Brad Pitt), fly-fishing in the Blackfoot River was more than a sport: it was a mystical union with nature. As Norman tells us in voice-over, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing," and the film captures the beauty and tranquility of nature as the father and son fish for trout. When Norman and Paul were boys (in 1910, when the story begins), they were homeschooled by their father. But they were set free in the afternoon "to learn the natural side of God's order," by fly-fishing and roaming the countryside.

Norman goes to Dartmouth for his education and studies litera-

ture. Redford reminds us of the Wordsworthian Romanticism of his theme in a scene after Norman returns to Montana following his graduation. He overhears his father reciting Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," and joins him in the concluding stanzas:

What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what is left behind; . . .  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that often lie too deep for tears.<sup>63</sup>

The overriding conflict in the film concerns Paul Maclean, who attends college in Montana and becomes a journalist specializing in fishing stories. He also gambles with dangerous people and drinks too much. But if Wordsworth is right, one of nature's gifts is to bring

unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.<sup>64</sup>

Nature has had her influence on even such a scapegrace as Paul, for he is a man with a conscience. He champions the cause of Native Americans, writing stories about prejudice and mistreatment.

Patrick Dooley points out the biblical parallels in Maclean's story, which certainly carry over in Redford's film. "The brother's keeper provides the story's dominant motif, and unmistakable parallels between the biblical parable of a father and his two sons and the bitter-sweet appreciation of life in Montana during the 1920s enriches our appreciation of Maclean's artful storytelling,"<sup>65</sup> and certainly of Redford's retelling of that story in film. As Dooley notes, the story and film also play on the biblical parallel of the prodigal with the dynamic between father and older brother and with the wildness of the younger son and the dutiful life of the elder.

The novel and film fill out the relationships from Jesus's parable, of course. All of his indiscretions as well as his innate goodness bring the prodigal Paul to a bad end, but when he fly-fishes on the Blackfoot, he is in tune with nature, as are his father and brother. When Norman is an old man, long after the death of his father and even his wife, he returns to the Blackfoot River for fly-fishing, and in the voice-over,

he tells us, "When I am alone in the half light of the canyon, all existence seems to fade into a being of soul . . . and the sound of the Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm, and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." His words suggest the New Age monism so deplored by conservative Christians. And the mystic intensity of Norman's union with nature echoes more of Wordsworth's lines, in which the poet speaks of nature inspiring "that blessed mood" that leads on,

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.<sup>66</sup>

Although Wordsworth wrote the lines two hundred years ago, they could not express New Age views of nature's spirituality more clearly, and the film might be retitled *Wordsworth Runs Through It*.

Another common New Age theme in film is the moral superiority of those uncorrupted by civilized values, a theme touched on in *A River Runs Through It*. Eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose radical ideas spurred the development of the French Revolution, popularized the "noble savage" concept. In *The Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau speculates about society before civilization and finds that primitive man was healthier, more empathetic, less prone to quarrels and violence—in general far better than people born into modern society. The "noble savage" philosophy—that human nature is good but is corrupted by civilization—flourished throughout the eighteenth century nurtured, no doubt, by explorers reporting on South Sea natives' idyllic lives. "Natural man" novels such as Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* and Robert Bage's *Hermesprong, or Man as He Is Not* (both published in 1796) celebrate the goodness of human nature as opposed to "art," or the corrupting influence of civilization. In these and other novels, a character nurtured by savages comes to Europe and finds civilization's values wanting.

This love of physical nature over the productions of man and deeply ingrained faith in humankind's innate goodness was a cultural divide in the eighteenth century. On one side were the French *philosophes*, whose works inspired the French Revolution, as well as British writers such as William Godwin and the Romantic poets. On the other was the view that human nature is flawed and as Thomas



Hobbes puts it in an oft-quoted passage from his *Leviathan*, life in a state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Hobbes wrote that a strong government is necessary to curb what he saw as humankind’s natural avarice and violence because “it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition called war and such a war as is of every man against every man.”<sup>67</sup> This Hobbes-Rousseau divide is certainly with us today in the politics of Left and Right, as represented in the works of Herbert Marcuse and Leo Strauss respectively.

Most New Age writing assumes the superiority of nature over civilization and the moral superiority of those who live close to nature. John Lash, for instance, first describes the Gaia concept as, for one thing, a belief that the Earth is a living being, “an animate entity with a consciousness of its own, in which human beings are included as cells,” and then notes that primitive peoples are more in tune with the rhythms of Mother Earth than are civilized people, who exploit nature rather than living in harmony with her.<sup>68</sup> This theme is played out in the Japanese animation films discussed earlier.

Many Hollywood films also support this view. *Silent Running* (1972) privileges nature over art in portraying a future setting where uncontrolled development and war have destroyed most vegetation on Earth. Surviving species are maintained in giant domes that orbit off Saturn. When Earth officials decide to destroy the domes, one crewman (Bruce Dern) who loves nature rebels and saves the structure on which he is stationed, which at his death he leaves to the droids who service it (to the accompaniment of Joan Baez’s folksongs on the sound track). *Dances with Wolves* (1990) also privileges the noble savage as opposed to civilization. During the American Civil War, Lieutenant Dunbar (Kevin Costner) miraculously survives a harebrained charge at Confederate lines. After he is decorated, he is transferred to a post on the frontier where he finds the life of Native Americans superior to that of civilization. The film celebrates nature and demonizes the forces of civilization that would destroy the native peoples’ lives. In *Medicine Man* (1992), a medical researcher (Sean Connery) in the South American rain forest accidentally discovers a cure for cancer but cannot replicate it. He must struggle to save the native people with whom he has lived and worked. To do so he must find the plant that provides the cure before bulldozers, symbolizing the intrusion of civilization, destroy the forest. Nature provides what art cannot: a cure for a deadly disease.

*Nell* (1994) is one of the finest dramatic developments of the natural man, or natural girl in this case, and nature and art themes. After a rape, a woman in North Carolina retires to the backwoods and bears

twin daughters, one of whom dies in childhood. Nell (Jodi Foster) survives (the spirit of her twin seems with her as her only companion) but has no contact at all with the outside world. Her mother has suffered a stroke that makes her speech unique, and Nell speaks and understands only that language, a condition called *idioglossia*, or language for one. She is almost exactly like the "natural man" characters in the novels of Bage and Inchbald.

Nell would be a treasure for behavioral scientists at the state university, and Professor Paula Olsen (Natasha Richardson) parks a houseboat on the lake near Nell's home to study her, sparking a conflict with a physician, Dr. Lovell (Liam Neeson), who had discovered Nell and came to understand her strange language. Lovell knows what would happen to her if the scientists get custody. Art would destroy nature, and she would be locked away for study.

The plot funnels down to a court appearance, where Nell's competence is judged. After refusing to speak for a long time, she addresses the judge and the audience in court with lines especially appropriate for an intuitive child of nature as Dr. Lovell interprets for her: "You have big things. You know big things. But you don't look into each other's eyes. And you're hungry for quietness. I've lived a small life. I know small things. I know loved ones—Jerry [Dr. Lovell], Paula, and May [her deceased twin]. I know everyone goes. Everyone goes away. And Nell is alone. Jerry is with Julie, and Nell is with Nell. Don't be frightened for Nell. Don't weep for her. I have no greater sorrows than yours."

The film also demonstrates Nell's wisdom as unspoiled nature's child through her effect on others, similar to that of the boy in *Powder*. The sheriff's wife is emotionally damaged, depressed and full of fears. Just the presence of Nell seems to have healed her by the end of the film. Nell also brings out Julie's emotional problems, and she goes from being the surrogate child of Lovell and Julie to a sort of spiritual healer for them both. Clearly, Rousseau is alive and well in the film industry.

### ANGELS IN THE METROPLEX

Angels have held a prominent place in the human imagination for at least three thousand years, from Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonian, and Persian polytheism and myth to Judaism and through Judaism to Christianity and Islam. They appear early in Genesis, when cherubim<sup>69</sup> armed with flaming swords guard the entrance to Eden as Adam and Eve are expelled, and angels figure prominently throughout the

Old Testament. They appear almost immediately in the Gospels. In Luke, Gabriel first visits Zacariah, a man “well stricken in years,” to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth will be the parents of a child who will become John the Baptist. Six months later Gabriel calls on Mary (cousin to Elizabeth) to tell her she is pregnant by the Holy Ghost (Luke 1:11–38). The “angel of the Lord” appears to Joseph in a dream to inform him of Mary’s virgin pregnancy in Mark 1:20–21. Angels continue to appear in the New Testament, at the birth of Jesus, after his death, and even more prominently in “The Revelation of St. John the Divine.”

Early in the history of Judaism, angels appear to be as susceptible to temptation as their human charges. One of the most interesting stories of angels and their fallibility, one that is indirectly or directly related to a good many film plots, begins 3,000 years ago, in a story from Genesis 6:1–3: “<sup>1</sup>And it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them,<sup>2</sup> That the sons of God [a code word for angels in the Bible] saw the daughters of men that they *were* fair: and they took them wives of all which they chose. . . .<sup>3</sup>There were giants in the earth in those days: and also after that, when the sons of God came unto the daughters of men, and they bare *children* to them, the same *became* mighty men which *were* of old, men of renown.” According to the story, these “giants in the earth,” the children begotten by angels with human women and the corruption they represented, caused God to destroy earth by the great flood.

The story of the romantic angels gets its fullest development in the tale of Enoch. His story begins in Genesis: “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” to Heaven (5:24). Enoch comes up again in Hebrews. “By faith, Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him” 11:5–6. But the fully developed version of the Enoch story, probably the source for New Testament writers, comes from what is now called the Apocalypse of Enoch written in the first or second century BCE<sup>70</sup> It recounts Enoch’s visit to Heaven and also his meeting the *Grigori*, translated as Watchers, the angels placed on earth first described in Genesis, apparently to oversee events after the Creation. The writer’s description of the Watchers’ fall is similar to the description in Genesis: “It happened after the sons of men had multiplied in those days, that daughters were born to them, elegant and beautiful. And when the angels, the sons of heaven, beheld them, they became enamored of them, saying to each other, Come, let us select for ourselves wives from the progeny of men, and let us beget children.”<sup>71</sup>

The leader of the Watchers, Samyaza, agreed that they would

marry, and they did indeed have children, called the *nephilem*. As in Genesis, they were of Brobdignagian proportions with a stature of three hundred cubits (about four hundred and fifty feet tall). The giants "devoured all that the earth could produce; until it became impossible to feed them."<sup>72</sup> To compound their sin, the Watchers taught skills to humans they were not supposed to have, including weaponry and sorcery as tutored by the angel Azryael.

The Watchers ask Enoch to write a petition to God asking forgiveness, which he does. Then he is given a dream, in which God sends him back to tell the angels of His undying anger: "You from the beginning were made spiritual, possessing a life which is eternal, and not subject to death for ever. Therefore I made not wives for you, because, being spiritual, your place is in Heaven."<sup>73</sup>

The story of the *Grigori* is such a good one that Jewish and early Christian writers picked it up as trope for the evils of sexual desire. The author of *The Book of Jubilees*, another text from the Apocrypha, apparently written by a Pharisee about the same time as Enoch, returns to the story of the fallen angels, connecting them with lust and the need for observance of the Hebrew Law.<sup>74</sup> Then the writers of Jude chapter 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 in the New Testament pick up the story, using the fall of angels as a metaphor demonstrating the evils of lust and the danger of heresy, sins of which the Watchers are copiously guilty. Samyaza, Azryael, and their cohorts, in all of these tellings of the story, are truly sinners in the hands of a very angry Old Testament God, bound in iron chains in *Sheol*, or Hell, depending on the writer, until the final judgment, when they will be cast into the fire.

Angels continue to come into history and scriptures. About seven hundred years after the New Testament books were written, Gabriel reappears in the history of world religion to visit the Prophet Muhammad and provide a new revelation that was soon to shake the world and continues to do so in our time. In all of these stories, angelology reflects the occult in positing hidden levels of being and sources of help and knowledge. Moreover, the transcendence in reaching these higher beings connects directly to New Age beliefs.

In our commercial society, angels are apt to have somewhat humbler roles than they have in ancient texts. Statuettes, posters, and other knickknacks crowd the shelves of stores, and bookstores do a lively business in books on angelic visitations and rescues. If profit flows from knickknacks and books, films about angels could hardly be far behind. Indeed, they appear early in film history as central characters.<sup>75</sup> In the past few years, Hollywood has rediscovered an old topic to give us several films with angels as characters, ranging from large-

budget cineplex movies such as *Michael* and *The Preacher's Wife* to "B" and direct-to-video products such as *The Prophecy* and its sequels.

Plots in films about angels fall into three distinct categories: Angels who make some sort of mistake that must be rectified; guardian angels or spirit guides who lead humans to new perceptions about life; and angels in love with human women. Like most discrete themes, these overlap in some films. Plots with angels usually make the heavenly visitors somehow flawed in a quite human way, thus creating dramatic tension between our expectation of them and their mundane flaws. Spirit guides, on the other hand, behave in quite New Age fashion, helping and advising the human they are charged with.

### GUARDIAN ANGELS AND SPIRIT GUIDES: *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* AND *JACOB'S LADDER*

In Matthew 18:10, Jesus places a child before his disciples and says, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in Heaven their angels always behold the face of my father who is in Heaven." Christ's comment suggests that "their angels" are guardians that help us through life. The guardian angel concept comes to Christianity from Jewish rabbinical lore, and the Children of Israel may have borrowed it from the Zoroastrian Babylonians during their captivity.

The New Age community has taken a serious interest in guardian angels, yet another cross-fertilization with Christianity. But often, the guardian is transformed into a spirit guide, an advanced soul on the astral plane who tries to help struggling humans. In *Dancing in the Light*, Shirley MacLaine expresses the popular view of the spirit guide when she describes her conversations with Tom McPherson, a Scotch/Irish pickpocket who lived three hundred years ago, and Ramtha, a more ancient soul. These guides, she writes, advise her and give her strength. Similar entities come up in many other New Age works, especially by mediums who say they get their information from guides, such as those mentioned in *The Scole Experiments* and medium Sylvia Brown's Francine or Manu described in *The Other Side and Back*. Both angels and spirit guides have made the passage from New Age literature to film in great numbers.

Filmic angels had been around for a long time before the New Age dawned. *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), an early development of the guardian angel theme with a comic twist, has the bumbling angel Clarence (Henry Travers) helping George Bailey (James Stewart).

George is an exemplary man who believes he has failed his community because the savings and loan bank he manages is near failure. In scenes indebted to Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and the visit of the three ghosts, Clarence shows what terrible things would have happened to the many people George has helped had he not been there to take them through troubles. In a conclusion that outdoes Dickens for sentiment, Clarence's intervention works, and he finally earns his wings. Although not an immediate hit, the film has become an icon of American culture as well as a Christmas favorite on TV and perhaps inspired the plethora of other films about guardian angels.

Even a film with so sentimental a plot as *It's a Wonderful Life* can have its cultural implications. Randall Fellows argues convincingly that director Frank Capra and screenwriters Phillip Van Doren Stern and Frances Goodrich established a political subtext. In this interpretation, George represents what liberal historian and political economist Arthur Schlesinger called the "vital center" in postwar America between political conservatism and what Schlesinger saw as mush-minded progressives of the Left. "Potter [the rapacious banker] represents the conservative position, George's Uncle Billy, who is soft, nice, but essentially incompetent, resonates in temperament, if not in politics, with Schlesinger's characterization of progressives."<sup>76</sup> George and his father, in this scheme of things, are the liberal center in their self-sacrifice and recognition of realities in order to help people get homes.

Despite the occasional political subtext, most films that portray human/angel contact are comedies or romances, with helpful angels lending a hand, perhaps a sort of wish fulfillment for audiences. But not all angels are so helpful. The Angel of Death is surely the least welcome of heavenly spirits. He makes the occasional film appearance, even as a lover in *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), remade as *Meet Joe Black* (1998). But Death makes a much earlier appearance in the medieval morality play *Everyman*. God grows wroth with the title character for his sins and sends Death to bring him to his judgment. Hooded Death then approaches Everyman and says:

On thee thou must take a long journey:  
Therefore thy book of count with thee thou bring.

Everyman has been attached to his worldly possessions, and he wants a longer life to enjoy them. Surely, then, Everyman speaks for all of us when he cries, "O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind."<sup>77</sup>

The 1990 film *Jacob's Ladder* inspires the same feelings. But the

rich symbolism and ambiguities of the film make it one of the best adaptations of New Age ideas and worthy of extended analysis. Scriptwriter Bruce Joel Rubin spent two years in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery before writing the film's script, which Adrian Lyne directed. *Jacob's Ladder* was far too philosophical and intense to attract the sort of box office that producers hope for, but it is "must viewing" for those interested in New Age ideas and who can stand a few scenes of intense violence. The dozens of Internet sites offering praise and interpretations suggest that the film found a cult following after its run in theaters.

*Jacob's Ladder* shows us the progress of a soul much like that of *Everyman*, moving from attachment to the things of this world to a perception that salvation comes only with detachment from them. But Lyne and Rubin clothe the traditional Christian theme of *Everyman* in a dazzling array of literary allusions. If Jacob, the film's hero, recalls *Everyman*, the plot asks us to remember "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Ambrose Bierce's classic short story, set during the American Civil War. Bierce's hero dreams of an escape as he is being hanged as a spy, a dream that is rudely interrupted as he comes to the end of his rope, so to speak. So it goes with Jacob (Tim Robbins) in *Jacob's Ladder*. Mortally wounded on the battlefield in Vietnam, he has a dream that teaches him a lesson that would surely most appeal to those looking for answers to life's conundrums. Since such mysteries cannot be addressed with empirical fact, the dream vision format, with occasional moments of reality as Jacob crawls through the jungle, evokes a powerful response. We learn nothing certain about Jacob's life before going to Vietnam, but in his dream, he has divorced his wife, works for the Post Office, and lives with Jezebel (Elizabeth Peña) in a tacky apartment. Whether he was ever a "Doctor of Philosophy," as his dream chiropractor and spirit guide Louis (Danny Aiello) calls him, is uncertain, but the philosophical tone of the dream would support such a conclusion.

The film's symbolism derives from literary and biblical allusions, and at the outset, these references suggest, both to the viewer and to Jacob, that we are in Hell. After his wound, Jacob's dream places him in a subway car (appropriately underground). When he gets off, he finds the exit blocked, so he must cross the tracks for the doorway on the other side. We might well imagine the tracks in the pit between exits to be the River Styx, the border of Hades in Greek myth (note the water Jacob steps through). One side, the one with the door locked, is life; and the other side, which he enters, death.

We see two signs while Jacob is in the subway car, one reading "New York may be a crazy town, but you'll never die of boredom.

Enjoy!" The word "Enjoy" has special meaning in the film, as it is the attachment to this world that Jacob must ultimately reject. The second sign reads "Hell—that's what life can be doing drugs. But it doesn't have to be that way. *Help is available, day or night*" (emphasis mine). Jacob comes to believe he is in Hell, and as we will see, help is available to him from two guardian spirits, Louis, the chiropractor, and Michael, the "hippie chemist" who trails him in his dream. Also, drugs *are* the source of his condition as he learns at the end of the film, though not the recreational kind; and the help he gets from his guides leads to his final choice. Much more suggests Jacob has entered Hell in his dream. The city is decaying, dirty, and intimidating. Cars driven by people with hooded faces career down deserted streets. Brief cuts show horns peeping through people's heads and reptilian members protruding from garments.

Jacob quickly suspects something is wrong. We see him looking at books on witchcraft and Satanism. Later, he pores intently over Dante's *Inferno*. When he meets army buddies, he finds that they think something unusual happened in Vietnam, as does Jacob. We learn little about these friends, though they are the faces we've seen in the opening Vietnam segment. It is Jacob's dream, after all, and with the exception of a few very brief shots, the point of view remains in his consciousness. His buddies are dream figures who reflect his own fears.

These friends help lead Jacob to a discovery that shows us his dream comes not from his dying mind but from outside, perhaps brought by his two spirit guides. Louis leads Jacob to acceptance of his death. Michael, who appears off and on throughout the film, warns Jacob of danger; and his revelation about what had happened on the battlefield suggests that Michael is a departed spirit who returns to help Jacob understand his death. The story from the chemist squares perfectly with incidents we see at the outset: the soldiers' symptoms in Jake's group, the approach of the helicopters, and the battle scene in which Jacob receives his mortal wound. These scenes all take place in the film's objective reality, which Jacob would have known and which his unconscious could have woven into his dream. But the filmmakers add a postscript at the fade, confirming rumors about the use of drugs like BZ in Viet Nam, an addition that shows their attempt to guide the viewer's response. Jacob could not have known about BZ before he received his mortal wound.

All of these incidents, however, revolve around a greater issue: the state of Jacob's soul and the help he gets from his spirit guides. The underlying allegory of Jacob's dream focuses on a choice between sense and soul, attachment to the things of *samsara* (the material



world in Buddhist theology) and the need to find detachment from them. In this allegory, Jezebel symbolizes all too obviously the world of sensory pleasure. Her name suggests her role. The biblical Jezebel, a pagan, corrupted the Hebrew king Ahab and persuaded him to worship Baal (see 1 Kings, chapter 16). So Jacob's mind makes a little joke when, in the first sequence in which we see them together, she tells him she doesn't like the "Bible names" of his children, and he replies, "You're such a heathen, Jezzy." From the first time we see her in Jacob's apartment to the end of the film, she entices him; and at the party scene leading to Jacob's fever, her performance on the dance floor looks like surrogate sexual intercourse.

The party scene, in fact, sums up the attachment to sensual pleasure Jacob's guide tells him he must reject. We see couples *en flagrante* on couches, while Jacob dodges moves by eager young women on the way into the room. Then before Jake's collapse, Director Lyne underscores the message with the often-present reptilian appendage, this time showing one of them wrapping itself around Jezzy as a tail, suggesting the Great Serpent of Hell. Then the horn that pops from her mouth is even more suggestive of Satan. Jacob's dream, then, associates Jezebel and their lifestyle with darkness and a sort of generalized tackiness.

Jacob's family, on the other hand, from whom he is estranged in his dream, symbolizes soul. During Jacob's fever following the party scene when he is immersed in ice (which composes the center of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*), he goes into a sort of dream within the dream. Through the process of association, he segues into his bedroom with Sarah, his wife, apparently before the Vietnam experience, chilled to the bone because the window is open. The viewer feels genuine love and warmth between Jacob and Sarah, not the sexual heat he shares with Jezebel. Also, the light in these scenes and the final scene in the apartment is different, warmer and more intense.

At the center of the dream's symbolism is Louis, the chiropractor, who, as a spirit guide or guardian angel, is a fine spokesman for New Age spirituality. Light from an unrevealed source is a motif throughout the film. We meet Louis once at the outset when Jacob goes in for an adjustment. Jacob suggests Louis's role when he says, "You know you look like an angel, Louis: an overgrown cherub." "I know," Louis responds, with a halo of light behind his head.<sup>78</sup> We see this light emanating from above the top of the screen over and over. From the perspective of New Age philosophy, this light that is immanent throughout the film suggests the light into which Jacob will go at his death.

The climax of the film begins when Jacob is hauled into a hospital

after he escapes government agents who beat him because in his dream he agitates to find out what had happened on the battlefield. His journey to the bowels of the hospital establishes Jacob in Hell; a group of surgeons surrounds him, with Jezebel among them, and he is told "There is no way out," an echo of the sign in Dante's *Inferno* at the portal of Hell reading "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." Then a surgeon plunges a needle into his forehead. But the surgeon is wrong about there being no way out. When Jacob awakens, Louis charges to the rescue in a scene that echoes the harrowing of Hell by Christ after his crucifixion, when he took the Patriarchs to Heaven (see *Inferno*, Canto 4).

The lecture explaining the film's New Age message comes when Louis gives Jacob his final chiropractic treatment, a scene bathed in light that again puts a halo around Louis's head. Combined with the treatment, Louis gives Jacob a lesson. He refers to the medieval theologian Meister Eckhart and paraphrases him. "The thing that burns in hell is the part of you that won't let go of your memories, your attachments." Devils, Louis continues, "are not punishing you. . . . They're freeing your soul. If you're frightened of dying, and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth." After his lecture, Louis raises the table and says, "I want to see if you can stand." "By myself?" Jacob asks. And when Jacob stands and walks, Louis exclaims, with satisfaction, "Hallelujah!" The scene shows Jacob is now spiritually ready for his death.

The scene has multiple allusions. For one thing, it resembles the passage in the Old Testament when the biblical Jacob has a dream in which he wrestles with "a man," presumably an angel or perhaps God. "And when he [the angel] saw that he prevailed not against him he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him" (Genesis 32:25). Then the biblical Jacob's opponent healed and ultimately blessed him.

But the reference to Meister Eckhart is the more important one. Although Eckhart was a Christian theologian of the fourteenth century, his message was a very New Agey one, and his work was declared heresy by the Church in 1369. He wrote that people become one with God by rejection of the world. The key word in Eckhart's surviving sermons is "detachment." "There is none happier than he who stands in uttermost detachment. No temporal, carnal pleasure but brings some ghostly mischief in its train, for the flesh lusts after things that run counter to the spirit and the spirit lusts for things that are repugnant to the flesh."<sup>9</sup> Eckhart specifies four stages of detachment: "The first breaks in and makes away with a man's perishable

things. The second deprives him of them altogether. The third not only takes them but makes them all forgotten, as though they had not been, and all about them. The fourth degree is right in God and is God himself. When we get to this stage, the King is desirous of our beauty.”<sup>80</sup> The angelic chiropractor in the film catches the true spirit of Eckhart’s message, and the concept of detachment matches well with the Eastern religions that underpin much New Age belief.

Following Jacob’s spiritual adjustment, he can indeed stand alone. He returns to his apartment, looks at his mementoes, and thinks about his past. He then meets his second spirit guide, Michael, the hippie chemist, who tells him about “the Ladder,” the drug created by the military to increase soldiers’ fierceness in battle, and introduces the allusion behind the title. The biblical Jacob had a second dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending on a ladder connecting heaven and earth (Genesis 28:12–16). BZ, says Michael, took users “straight down the ladder, to the base anger.” Michael, then, can be viewed as a departed soul and guide in the New Age tradition. He tells Jacob, “The ladder was my baby. I had to find you, man.”

Jacob takes a taxi home to Sarah and his children, giving the driver all his money, but no one is at home. He has followed Louis’s advice, divesting himself of everything, finally acting out the four stages of Eckhart’s agenda for detachment. He has a vision while in the taxi of being stabbed on the battlefield. Again, the apartment is bathed in light, a mellow light at first that gradually increases. It is the same light that has been immanent from the top of the screen throughout the film. The sound of a heart beating slowly signals us that Jacob is dying, and then Gabriel (a ten-year-old Macaulay Culkin), his son who had been killed in an accident and is a recurrent symbol of loss in the film, appears at the bottom of the stairs. They go up together and ascend into the light. In an interview, Adrian Lyne notes that “Bruce’s screenplay was full of Judeo-Christian imagery,” and that “when Jacob finally goes to heaven at the end, it was very much a staircase to heaven without the clichéd clouds and angels.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the scene returns us to the symbolic title of the film. The staircase is one aspect of the biblical ladder, which connects the divine and the mundane. So we see Jacob ascend the “ladder” with his son just as the drug BZ, the other symbolism of the title, had taken the soldiers “straight down the ladder” to anger and violence. The scene brings to mind once again the hero’s final words in *Everyman*, when, having forsaken the material world, he cries, “Into thy hands, most mighty One, for ever I commend my spirit.”<sup>82</sup>

ANGELS IN LOVE: *THE BISHOP'S WIFE*, *THE PREACHER'S WIFE*,  
AND *WINGS OF DESIRE*

Desire or attachment to the things of this world as portrayed in *Jacob's Ladder* has long been a topic of religious, philosophical, and literary discourse. In ancient times, desire was often seen as the enemy of the soul. In Plato's writings, for instance, desire is the source of corruption. In *Phaedrus*, Plato specifies that those souls moved from within remain disembodied and immortal, beyond the coil of the flesh, but in communion with other souls. But those souls who desire that which is without this communion become human and acquire a body. Thus desire brings about birth and the corrupt body.<sup>83</sup>

The great world religions have similarly condemned desire. In the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna lectures Arjuna on the subject: "when a man gives up all varieties of desire for sense gratification, which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind, thus purified, finds satisfaction in the self [soul] alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness."<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Sakaymuni Buddha condemns desire as the enemy of the soul in the "Four Noble Truths," which specify the causes of pain in the human condition. They are "the craving, which tends to rebirth, combined with pleasure and lust, finding pleasure here and there; namely the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence."<sup>85</sup> Christ repeatedly enjoins his hearers against desire with such statements as "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall save it" (Matthew 10:39). As noted above, Meister Eckhart took the issue of detachment from desire to a new level in the Middle Ages, and it was the *Grigoris'* desire for human women that put them in Sheol in the Bible and Enoch.

The concept of angels experiencing desire for human women is rife with those most precious elements for dramatic writers: conflict and romance. And the love of angels for humans is yet another example of the sort of doomed love between those on different levels that we see in *The Mummy* and so many other occult films. Clearly, the conflict of a supernatural being in love with a mortal transcends the usual boy-meets-girl plot, adding, as it does a generous dose of irony in portraying a ghost, an angel, or superior alien who experiences the same desire that burns in humans. Angels and other supernatural spirits in these films are almost exclusively male, mirroring the desire of the male Watchers for human women from Genesis.

So it goes in the pre New Age film *The Bishop's Wife* (1947); the angel Dudley, played by Cary Grant, comes to the aid of Bishop Henry Brougham (David Niven), who is desperate to raise funds to

build a cathedral. When Dudley introduces himself to the amazed and distrustful Henry, he articulates the guardian angel concept: "You see, we're everywhere, helping people who deserve to be helped. When you're walking through a strange city you may suddenly look into a strange face. It may be the face of a murderer, or it may be the face of an angel." Complication arises when Dudley, like Samyaza and his band of Watchers, finds himself attracted to a human woman, specifically Julia, the bishop's wife of the title (Loretta Young). The bishop has been too distracted to be an attentive husband or concerned father to his little daughter. Julia is distressed because the romance has gone out of their lives. And here is Dudley, the model for the sensitive male, who knows how to make her laugh and have fun.

Dudley seems destined to share the fate of the fallen Watchers, falling in love with a mortal woman. He tells Julia that he must leave and not return. She asks, "Will we ever see you again?" He replies, "They seldom send us to the same place twice. We might form attachments." As the conversation continues, he waffles about leaving. But Julia realizes that Dudley, whom she does not know to be an angel, is in love with her, and she insists that he go away. He pleads, "Don't send me away. I'm tired of being a wanderer. . . . I'm tired of an existence where one is neither hot nor cold, hungry nor full." Clearly, Dudley has begun to feel desire. But Julia insists.

Before he leaves, Dudley gives Henry new perspective on the duties of a minister. Then when he takes his leave of the bishop, Henry asks if there is some difficulty. Dudley answers, "The difficulty is in me. When an immortal finds himself envying a mortal trusted to his care, it's a danger signal. . . . Kiss her for me, you lucky Henry." Thus, he narrowly escapes the fate of Samyasa, Azazyel, and the other Watchers.

The plot line is such a good one that Samuel Goldwyn studios produced an update nearly fifty years later, *The Preacher's Wife* (1996), with an all-Black cast and some wonderful gospel music from Whitney Houston as Julia, the wife of minister Henry Biggs (Courtney B. Vance). The angel Dudley is played by Denzel Washington in this version. The plotline is similar, with Dudley developing unangelic feelings for Julia. But the film adds a spin on preservation of the Black community and some emphasis on New Age karma when a rich Black entrepreneur, Joe Hamilton, plans to foreclose his mortgage on the old church to build a shopping center. But it's Dudley to the rescue when he visits Hamilton on Christmas Eve, like the Ghost of Christmas Past, to remind him of a few things. Dudley doesn't use the word "karma," but the words add up to the same. "It's like your past, Joe," he tells him. "You can walk away from it but it's still there. . . . Look at the real price before you close the deal."

*Wings of Desire* (1987) (German title *Der Himmel über Berlin*), directed by Wim Wenders with script by Peter Handke, takes the theme of angels in love and the issue of attachment to a quite different level, complete with an ironic twist on the ancient tale of the *Grigori* and a reverse take on detachment that suggests a cultural shift toward a postmodern view of desire. The film's rich irony and symbolism make it, like *Jacob's Ladder*, well worthy of extended discussion.

*Wings of Desire* focuses on two angels, Damiel and Cassiel (played by Bruno Ganz and Otto Sander), both clearly *Grigori*, Watchers in the tradition of "Genesis," Enoch, and Jubilees. We see many other Watchers throughout the film. In addition to observing and recording, part of their function seems to be to encourage humans or help them feel better. As they move through the world, they hear the thoughts of the people around them. In libraries, we see many of them standing near those studying, perhaps to serve as a sort of muse, and at other times we see the two central Watchers put hands on people in despair to relieve them. The film at this point is in black-and-white, reflecting the angels' point of view.

In an early scene, we see Damiel and Cassiel carry on a conversation. Cassiel is a true Watcher, recording things he sees in his memorandum book and expressing no particular feeling for what he records. Damiel, however, has begun to feel desire. He says: "It's great to live only by the spirit, to testify day by day. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of forever hovering around, I'd like to feel there's some weight to me to end my eternity and bind me to earth. At each step, each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say, 'now,' and 'now,' and 'now,' and no longer say 'since always,' and 'forever.'" Damiel feels desire for temporal and sensory involvement. In a series of biblical allusions to past experiences of angels, he muses: "Whenever we did participate, it was only a pretense. Wrestling with one of them, we allowed a hip to be dislocated in pretense only. We pretended to catch a fish. We pretended to be seated at the tables and to drink and eat, and we were served roast lamb and wine, in the tents out there in the desert."<sup>86</sup> Clearly, desire has come to Damiel, as it does to Dudley in *The Bishop's Wife*. But times and culture have changed, and Damiel will act out his desire, though he has not yet found an object for it.

Cassiel, on the other hand, expresses the correct sentiment for a Watcher. After Damiel expresses desire "to be a savage. Or at least to be able to take off your shoes under the table and to be able to stretch your toes barefoot." Cassiel responds "To be alone, to let things happen. To remain serious. We can only be as savage as we can remain serious. To do no more than observe, collect, testify, preserve. To remain

a spirit. Keep your distance. Keep your word.” Cassiel speaks for detachment, the correct attitude for a Watcher in the ancient tradition.

Damiel’s desire finds focus when he visits a traveling circus, where Marion (Solveig Dommartin), a lovely acrobat, performs her trapeze act, replete with angelic-looking wings. The performers are told that the day’s performance will be the last, as the management is out of cash. Then when Damiel follows Marion to her trailer, he looks about and picks up what seems to be the spiritual essence of a stone, looks longingly at Marion, and listens to her lengthy internal monologue on her feelings about life and her need to be desired by men as she first lies on her bed and then sits up to remove her robe.

“I only need to be ready, and the world’s men will look at me. [Damiel reaches out to touch her.] Longing. Longing for a wave that will stir in me. That’s what makes me clumsy, the absence of pleasure. Desire to love! Desire to love!” It is surely no accident that Marion’s monologue stresses the word “desire,” for that is exactly what she inspires in the Watcher. As she undresses, the screen floods with color, symbolizing that desire.

Wenders ends the sequence with a visual metaphor, demonstrating Damiel’s desire for life and for Marion. We hear her think, pondering the nature of her internal life, “Inside closed eyes. Even the stones come alive”; and Damiel looks meaningfully at the essence of the stone that he has picked up. The shot demonstrates his desire for life, not the spiritual essence. The parallel to Hebrew myth seems clear. Marion has become for Damiel one of the daughters of men, who, in the words of Jubilees is “beautiful to look upon.” And like Samyaza and the Watchers, Damiel desires this beautiful woman. Wenders reminds us of a mythic parallel, the fate of the Giant children of the Watchers, with music by a rock group from Marion’s record player. A vocalist wails about the flood, ending with a line at the scene’s cut, “And Moses said to Noah . . .,” referring to God’s sending the flood to destroy the Nephilem, the Giants in the Earth begotten by the *Giganti* from human women, with Noah’s ark saving life on Earth.

Peter Falk, playing himself, is in Berlin to make a film, apparently about the holocaust. Falk is a former Watcher who has become human. In a scene outside a coffee stand, he senses Damiel nearby and says, “I can’t see you, but I can feel you,” and goes on to speak of the joys of sensation. The one-way conversations prove to be the last straw for Damiel in deciding to alter his state.

When Damiel later speaks with his fellow angel, Cassiel asks, “You really want . . .,” leaving the question unfinished; and Damiel responds, “Yes. . . . I’ve been outside long enough . . . out of the world long enough.” Later, again speaking to Cassiel, he says, “I’ll enter

into the history of the world, even if only to hold an apple in my hand" (a pun on the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge) and continues with the variety of sensory pleasures he anticipates, still carrying the essence of stone in his hand that serves as a trope of angelic lack of sensation. "I'll take her in my arms," he says, and his desire brings his death as an angel into birth as a human. The screen then goes to color to signal his humanity.<sup>87</sup>

The final dialogue between Damiel and Marion, when they eventually find each other in a club, again, alludes to angelology from the Bible and the Apocrypha. Damiel had come to Marion in a dream the preceding night, and she seems to know him and to be searching for him. They finally meet in a club bar where a rock concert goes on next door, with Nick and the Bad Seed, apparently the same group from the recording in Marion's trailer, singing "From Her to Eternity." She knows him from her dream. "It's time to get serious," she says, and goes into a lengthy monologue on chance. "We two are more than just two. . . . You need me. There is no greater story than ours, a man and a woman. There will be giants." The reference to "giants" is another allusion to Genesis, Enoch, and Jubilees, of course, and the giants that resulted from the union of angels and earth women. It also connects to the music from the record in Marion's trailer, with its allusion to the Flood.

*Wings of Desire* gives us an ironic and postmodern reverse spin to the ancient story of the Watchers. Desire caused their fall. But *Wings of Desire* changes all that. Desire fully humanizes Damiel, and the film celebrates desire as the force that brings people together in a bond of love. The film reverses the New Age theme of transcendence, as Damiel *descends* rather than *transcends*, and ironically seems the better for his change. Remembering his night with Marion, Damiel ponders in internal monologue, "I was in her and she was around me. . . . She took me home and I found my home." They created "an immortal common image" in their union. Then Wenders returns to the biblical and apocryphal theme of angelic/human couplings, with Damiel pondering, "only the amazement of man and woman has made a human of me," and in a final shot, we see him writing, "I now know what no angel knows."

Wenders directed *Far Away, So Close!* (1993) as a sequel to *Wings of Desire*, focusing on Cassiel, the faithful angel in the original; but the ironies and plays on other texts are lost in the sequel, replaced by a rather commonplace religious message. The opening frames of the film give us lines from Matthew 6:22: "The light of the body is the eye. Therefore, if thine eye be clear thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil thy whole body shall be full of dark-



ness.” The quotation sets the theme for Cassiel’s temptation and eventual spiritual triumph.

When a child whom he is watching falls from the top of a building, Cassiel screams and “falls” from his angelic state to catch her on the ground. As the plot unfolds, Cassiel has difficulty dealing with his humanity and is tempted by a truly fallen angel, Flesci, the “powerful enemy” of humankind. “Earth has mastered them,” he and his fellow angel Raphaela had mused in discussing humans, and so it goes with Cassiel, as he falls prey to alcohol and greed. But he saves himself by making a choice once again to lose his human life to save the same child once again, and he returns to his Watcher form.

The film is laden with pious speculation about the human condition: the battle of light and darkness, and the nature of evil as well as the problem of recognizing evil and what to do about it when one does. But these speculations come across as platitudes. The film closes with a speech from Cassiel that connects the action to the passage from Matthew cited in the opening: “We are the messengers. The message is love. We are nothing; you are everything to us. Let us dwell in your eyes, see your world. Recapture through us the loving look once again. Then we’ll be close to you, and you to Him.”

Obviously, the dramatic conflict of love between supernatural entities and human beings is an interesting one, laden with the transcendence so focal to New Age thought. Wenders’s poetic direction and Handke’s script, however, turn *Wings of Desire* into a work of art with interesting plays of irony. A different team produced the script for *Far Away, So Close!* Wenders is listed in the script credits for both films, but Peter Handke was most responsible for writing the *Wings of Desire* script, while Ulrich Zieger and Richard Reitinger wrote most of the sequel. Apparently the new scriptwriting team had a quite different take on the material, and the edgy irony of the original was lost. An interviewer who asked Wenders about *Far Away, So Close!* mentioned that the strength of some of his other films lay in what was unsaid but understood. In his response, Wenders affirms his intent to communicate an explicit message in the film: “Everybody wants to stay out of things. Today, films are evaluated exclusively by their entertainment value, and it bothered many people that *Far Away, So Close!* had a message, especially if they saw it as a Christian message.”<sup>88</sup> *Far Away, So Close!* does indeed have a message, but so does *Wings of Desire*, if a very different one, and the subtle ironies of the latter film make it a richer, more satisfying film experience.

*City of Angels* (1998), an American adaptation of *Wings of Desire*, turns art into a mall date movie replete with Hollywood glitz and transforms cinematic poetry into prose. A comparison with the

source provides an apt demonstration of Wenders's and Hanke's artistry.

ERRING ANGELS: *HERE COMES MR. JORDAN*, *HEAVEN CAN WAIT*, *DOWN TO EARTH*, *MICHAEL*, AND THE *PROPHECY* SERIES

Genesis, The Book of Jubilees, and The Book of Enoch established the fallibility of angels in matters of the heart (if angels have such an organ). But that fallibility extends beyond romantic issues in other films. We laugh at the incongruity of a banker doing a pratfall. Similarly, we laugh at the incongruity of heavenly angels committing all-too-human gaffes or, as in *Michael*, demonstrating more than human appetites for food, ladies, and liquor. In fact, all of these films are a sort of ironic reversal of New Age transcendence, with the transcendent being descending to the earthly and sometimes earthy as erring angels.

In *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), another pre New Age film, an erring angel takes Joe Pendleton (Robert Montgomery) from life too soon after a plane crash, and Joe, a boxer and light-heavyweight contender, arrives in Heaven fifty years before his time, taken in error by Messenger 7013 (Edward Everett Horton). Mr. Jordan, the supervising angel, played by Claude Rains, tries to make up for the mistake by putting Joe in the body of a man, the wealthy Bruce Farnsworth who has just been murdered by his wife and business secretary. All turns out well, however, when Jordan finds Joe just the right body and then erases the memory of all that had happened (one remembers the waters of Lethe erasing memories of the afterlife in *The Aeneid*).

Although it precedes the Age of Aquarius, the film gives us a quite New Agey version of the soul. The body is simply a vessel. The angelic Mr. Jordan tells the doubting Joe that he'd "just be donning Farnsworth's physical covering, like donning an overcoat." The metaphor of the body as clothing to the soul is a pervasive one. It comes up in the Egyptian Hermetic fragments: "The soul passeth from form to form; and the mansions of her pilgrims are manifold. . . . Thou putteth off thy bodies as raiment; and as vesture dost thou fold them up. Thou art old, O Soul of man; yea, thou art from everlasting."<sup>89</sup> And in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna tells the reluctant Arjuna, "As a person puts on new garments, giving up the old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones."<sup>90</sup> The film also echoes New Age views on karmic destiny. Jordan assures Joe when he has to change bodies again that nobody is

cheated. "Eventually all things work out. There's design in everything."

The idea of Heaven and angels making mistakes in taking care of humans was such a good one that it led to two remakes, the 1978 *Heaven Can Wait*, which transforms Joe Pendleton (Warren Beatty) from a boxer in the original to a professional football quarterback, and *Down to Earth* (2001), with Chris Rock as a club comedian instead of boxer/quarterback. These films, along with *Michael* (1996), a farcical on-the-road comedy with a team of tabloid reporters accompanying the archangel (John Travolta) on a cross-country tour, demonstrate a basic principle of comedy articulated by Henri Bergson in *On Laughter*: incongruity is funny.

In *Prophecy* (1994), also titled *God's Army*, Gabriel is surely the most errant of filmic angels, Satan and his minions excepted. Director and writer Gregory Widen's script is true high concept (a single concept that drives the plot), and the result is a classy film made on a low budget with interesting plays on angelology. Widen invents a 23rd chapter of The Revelation of St. John for his fictional frame (there is no 23rd chapter). New York detective Thomas Daggett (Elias Koteas), who had trained for the priesthood but rejected ordination when he lost his faith, translates the lines from a handwritten Bible found at the scene of an apparent murder: "And there shall be a dark soul, and this soul will eat other dark souls, and so become their inheritor. The soul will not rest in an angel but a man, and he will be a warrior." Then these lines from the fictitious 23rd chapter follow, establishing the concept that drives the plot and providing the lecture element of the occult film: "And there were angels who could not accept the lifting of man above them, and like Lucifer rebelled against the armies of the loyal archangel Michael. And there was a second war in Heaven."

The body at the scene turns out to be that of Uziel,<sup>91</sup> a rebel angel killed by the good angel Simon in an opening fight. The angel Gabriel (Christopher Walken in an over-the-top performance) leads the rebels in the second war. He's angry because God gave grace to humans and put them above angels, so his recurrent line is "I just want things to be the way they were." He has come to Earth to find the dark soul of the prophecy, planning to use it against God's army. The forces converge at Chimney Rock, Arizona, where the good angel Simon (Eric Stoltz) fights to save Mary, a child in whom the dark soul has been stored by Simon, with Thomas Daggett leading the fight against the rebel angels.

The script established a fine concept, both using existing angelology and deviating from it and featuring some major angelic players: Gabriel, Uziel, and Raphael. But the angels in this film are not en-

tirely immortal. They can be stunned, but do not die, by gunfire, falls, and other violence. They can be killed, however, specifically by removal of the heart. Not so in angelology. Milton's angels at the great battle of Armageddon in *Paradise Lost* slice and dice each other with swords and spears but instantly heal.

Good concepts such as that which drives *Prophecy* are hard to come by and usually inspire sequels. *Prophecy II* and *Prophecy III* soon followed for the direct-to-video market, in 1998 and 2000, respectively, with Gabriel (still Walken) returning. More adaptation of biblical angelology follows, with the good angels set on begetting a *Nephilem*, a child resulting from the coupling of an angel and a human, who will lead the charge for the forces of light. More invented prophecy reveals that such a being is necessary to combat the bad angels. The angel Danyael (Russell Wong) gets the enviable job of seducing and impregnating Valerie (the luminous Jennifer Beals) to beget such a child, and both *Prophecy II* and *III* focus on his birth and mission. The scriptwriter indulges in a bit of humor, giving the Russell Wong character the right name. *Danyal* comes up in Enoch as one of the fallen Watchers who begot children with human women.

Although Gabriel fails again in the first sequel, transformed into human form, he helps defeat the wicked angels in *Prophecy III*. At the end of the latter film, the reformed Gabriel says, echoing the Gospel of John, "It's not a mindless, indifferent universe. . . . In the end, there's still the Word, everywhere: in Heaven and its angels, in the Earth and stars, even in the darkest part of the human soul. It was there that the Word burned brightest. And for a moment, I was blinded." A *Prophecy IV* was released in 2005, moving the War in Heaven to Eastern Europe.

The sequels lack the wit and originality of *Prophecy*. But Walken makes them entertaining, and the concept remains an interesting one. The films are determinedly ecumenical. There's no mention of Christ in the War in Heaven, so Jews or Muslims could relate to the story line as well as Christians, either evangelical or New Age. And for direct-to-video products, the sequels are surprisingly literate. In *The Ascent*, Danyael (the *Nephilem* character) is a Christ figure, and his girl friend Maggie's full name suggests, of course, Magdalene. Many writers have speculated in recent years that Mary Magdalene was actually Jesus's wife. We see Danyael in crucifixion position more than once, and when he is shot in his storefront church, Maggie holds him in something close to a Pietà.

The subject of errant angels offers a segue into yet another kind of angel: the original fallen angel Satan. His story has inspired occult activity through the centuries, and the evil he represents is a natural for horror stories and films.

## 3

## Sign, Symbol and Primal Fears in the Satanic Film

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS INVITED TO DO A LECTURE ON NEW religious movements in a suburb of St. Louis, and part of my presentation focused on Satanism. A month or so after my visit, the editor of the local newspaper, who had heard my talk, called me. After the usual introductory chat, he got to the point. "We've been getting a lot of stories here about blonde, blue-eyed children being kidnapped and sacrificed in Satanic cult ceremonies. Do you think these stories could be true?"

"Hmm," I said, thinking over what I'd heard. "Are you missing any blonde, blue-eyed children in town?"

"No," he replied.

"Then I think you've got an urban legend going around," I said.

Stories about the Devil and his minions have been used for a variety of purposes over the centuries: from scaring children into obedience, to evidence in witch trials, to excuses for such pogroms as those against Jews, Cathars, and Templars. From such real-life horror, tales of Satanic worship have evolved into the fictional frame for stories and films. All occult films can be defined as fantasy, and many fall into the horror category. But almost all Satanic films are a subgenre of the horror film. Just why vicarious fear entertains audiences is a vexed and vexing question, explored by writers from Edmund Burke in his *On the Sublime* in the eighteenth century through various psychological critics in our own time. But a consensus of criticism would hold that the appeal of the tale of terror seems firmly rooted in unconscious responses.

A truism among literary critics holds that the most important element in creating the tale of terror is atmosphere: the ambience or feel of the scene that, along with threatening incidents that happen there, inspires the sublime shiver. Satanic films adapt some elements of the traditional gothic atmosphere of darkness, storms, and haunted space, but the best of these films add a new dimension: sign and symbol

from the demonic tradition that derive from biblical origins, historical Satanic practices, and urban legend. Writers and directors can rely on a system of visual cues from these sources that viewers may not understand completely at the rational level, but the images have power to supply the screen environment of dread for a horror film. Signs and symbols in the Satanic cinema have ready-made suggestion because audiences have been conditioned by religion and folklore to respond to them.

Satanic films range from excellent productions such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* to the ridiculous, Satanic "B" films such as *Satan's Cheerleaders* or *The Demon Within*, in their treatment of Satan's works. Excellent or awful, they fall into four central plot lines: the Satanic coven or cult story; the coming of the Antichrist; the exorcism theme; and the Faust story. Filmmakers often combine these narratives, but one usually predominates. In the best Satanic films, writers and directors rely on visual symbolism as well as allusions to the Satanic tradition that are more or less consistent with the lore of Satanism in order to create viewer response.

Most film critics agree that the popular film mirrors social issues and concerns. Michael Wood, for instance, writes: "Much of our experience of popular films . . . resides in the place we usually call the back of the mind, the place where we keep all those worries that won't come out into the open and won't go away either, that nag at us from the edges of consciousness. Movies bring out those worries without letting them loose and without forcing us to look at them too closely. They trot around the park in the half-light and the exercise does us all good."<sup>1</sup> Wood's analysis seems particularly true of the Satanic film. An important ingredient of the horror element in most Satanic films is paranoia, an irrational fear of the insidious Other who corrupts and would destroy our society from within. Filmmakers can rely on this "worry that won't come out into the open" about the Other to inspire the pleasures of horror, and the sign and symbol of the Satanic tradition cue those fears. But this apparently inborn fear of the Other exploited in the horror film is mirrored in many kinds of real-world cultural conflict, from race, to religion, to gender and sexual issues, not only in our culture but in societies around the world.

### THE DEVIL'S GONNA GET YOU IF YOU DON'T WATCH OUT: ORIGINS OF SATANISM

Scholars agree that the Satanic mythos in the Judeo-Christian tradition did not develop before the captivity of the Hebrews in Babylonia

in the sixth century BC. The Satan we see in earlier books of the Old Testament is certainly not the locus of evil portrayed in the New Testament. Genesis does not identify the serpent who seduced Eve as Satan. In Job, he is one of the “sons of God,” a biblical code term for angels, who “came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.” Satan initiates a great deal of trouble after God praises his servant Job. He inquires, “Doth Job fear God for naught?” (1:6–9), thus beginning all of Job’s troubles. Satan is not a demon in this passage but an angel and an adversary to humans. Schwartz notes that Jewish myth makes a distinction between Satan and Lucifer: Satan being the “Tempter and heavenly prosecutor, who often cooperates with God,” and Lucifer the outcast who rebelled.<sup>2</sup> Both Isaiah 14:12–13 and 2 Enoch 29:4–5 describe Lucifer as being cast out of heaven with his cohort of angels. Cultural contact during the captivity in Babylonia brought a change in Judaism to acceptance of a personification of evil, the enemy of man and God and the equivalent of Angra Mainyu, the force of evil that opposed Ahura Mazda, the source of light and goodness in Zoroastrianism.<sup>3</sup> According to Schwartz, Christian theology melded Lucifer with Satan into the evil one that Jesus describes in Luke 10:18: “I saw Satan fall from Heaven like lightning.” Since Christianity has melded Satan and Lucifer into the same being, I have used the names interchangeably.

Satan has achieved full status as the Father of Lies in the Gospels and later books of the New Testament. Moreover, he has become the Other, who, with his shadowy minions, threatens us. During the Middle Ages groups charged with heresy were accused of Satanic practice, an efficient way of getting rid of hated Others as well as of acquiring their wealth. But it was in the European countryside, historians speculate, that the true worship of Satan began. That Satan’s appearance as it has come down to us is strikingly similar to the horned, tailed Cernunnos, the hunting god from pagan times, may be no accident. One speculation among historians holds that the Church demonized the pagan gods worshiped by peasants before Christianity came to the European countryside, creating the image of Satan based on the Horned God. Arthur Lyons suggests that the Roman Church’s oppression alienated the peasantry. Perhaps, according to their line of reasoning, if Rome was cruel, the other side would be better, leading to a mass in celebration of Satan, the enemy of the Church. After all, his appearance was familiar, due to the Church’s adaptation of Satan in the form of the Horned God. Lyons writes: “For the peasant, who saw himself victimized by the Church, the [Satanic] Mass . . . was a way of venting hatred, of outpouring all the frustrated energy accumulated by the years of humiliation suffered at the hand of the

Church. It was a way of asserting his individuality, a way of thumbing his nose at God."<sup>4</sup>

The Reformation and Enlightenment probably ended Satanic worship in the countryside. The Black Mass continued in the upper strata of society in eighteenth-century England, however, in groups like the Hell-fire Club and the Medmenham Abbey group, frequented by notables such as Sir John Dashwood, politician John Wilkes, and, according to rumor, Benjamin Franklin. Lyons suggests that these rites were "much more complete and formalized, and more monstrous in [their] execution than [their] peasant counterpart. These were the rites that were to serve as the prototypes for the Black Masses of later fiction writers such as de Sade and Dennis Wheatley, thus being perpetuated in the minds of men."<sup>5</sup>

The Satanic tradition continued into the nineteenth century. Romantic writers admired Satan as a fellow rebel. British poet Lord Byron's heroes exude a strong whiff of brimstone in *Manfred* and *Cain*, and poet-artist William Blake connected Satan with energy, creativity, and individualism. French poet Charles-Pierre Baudelaire referred to himself as a Satanist and titled a book of poems *Litanies of Satan*. Other French writers during the nineteenth century continued sensational revelations of Satanic activity.<sup>6</sup>

Are there Satanists today; and if so, do films that use Satanism as frame accurately portray their activities? Clearly, there are those who profess Satanism. Anton LaVey, born Howard Stanton Levey (1936–97), formed in 1966 the Church of Satan in San Francisco, named himself High Priest, and wrote *The Satanic Bible*, an occult manual drawn from a variety of other sources. He also established a legend about himself and an organization that claims 10,000 members,<sup>7</sup> and has since moved headquarters to New York. Michael Aquino, a U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, left the Church of Satan, founded The Temple of Set in 1975, and is High Priest of the group today. While not specifically describable as Satanic (Set is the Egyptian god of the underworld), the Temple describes itself on its Web site as "a magical order of the Left Hand Path."<sup>8</sup> In his book *The Church of Satan*,<sup>9</sup> Aquino criticizes LaVey for the sensual indulgence he claimed was common among his followers and LaVey's growing emphasis on money over the original philosophy. Numbers of followers are unavailable, but the high priestess of the Temple told me in an interview that the organization has "pylons" (affiliated groups) established throughout the U.S. and abroad, including South America, Japan, Hong Kong, and South Africa.

My contacts with Setians and the Church of Satan indicate that they conduct ceremonies with sign and symbol somewhat like those



of the legendary Black Mass, minus blood sacrifice and the cruder elements. Both LaVey's Church of Satan and the Temple of Set profess a base in the occult and magical practice. According to Setians, "The Satanic religion proposes to raise the individual to personal godhead, free from enslavement to any other 'god.'"<sup>10</sup> Both LaVey in his writings and the Temple on its Web site emphasize fulfillment of personal desire to the fullest, so long as no harm comes to others. Neither the Temple of Set nor the Church of Satan professes any belief in the existence of Satan as a fallen angel.

But are there Satanic cults who sacrifice blonde, blue-eyed children, as my friend the newspaper editor asked me after my talk? Again, it depends on whom you ask. Whether Satanic cult stories are *all* urban legend or not is hotly disputed. Debunkers deny that such groups exist. Evangelical Christians ardently believe that they do. During the 1970s and 1980s, several books appeared purporting to be written by victims of Satanic abuse that supported the conservative Christian position.

Lauren Stratford tells her story in *Satan's Underground* (1988). She claims she was abused by her mother's men friends throughout her childhood and, after drifting into the pornography industry, raped during Satanic coven sabbats. She describes hooded men and women in black robes at her first sabbat chanting, "All Hail to the father, Satan" in a chamber with an altar engraved with a reversed pentagram, a goat's head above it, and an upside-down cross above the altar, all symbols ubiquitous to stories of the Black Mass. She describes members cutting themselves to gather their own blood in a chalice, then urinating in it, mixing it with wine and drinking it as a Satanic Eucharist. She also claims to have been ritually raped by all of the male members of the coven, then mocked when the priest told her, "Satan has had you!" Demons materialized during the ceremony, she says, to put terrible curses on people when called on to do so by the participants. She claims that the coven sacrificed children, even skinning them alive before killing them.<sup>11</sup> Through all this, she was controlled, she says, by an evil spirit guide, perhaps a conceptual reversal of the benevolent guide of New Age tradition.

So it goes, too, in *Michelle Remembers*, which appeared in 1980. According to the book, during sessions with her psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder, Michelle Smith dredged up long-suppressed memories of Satanic cult abuse. The grown up and married Michelle claims to have begun having disturbing memory flashes that took her to Pazder for help. In her sessions, she recalled childhood memories of a Satanic coven in which her mother was involved. She was often placed on the altar for ceremonies in "the round room," she states, where the coven

met. She describes the coven's ritual defecation on the Cross and Bible, sacrifice of animals and a human, and the mutilation of babies, which, she notes, were most likely "premature fetuses or stillborn, possibly stolen from hospitals."<sup>12</sup>

Christian conservative writer William Viser quotes Geraldo Rivera's sensational lead into his 1988 TV documentary *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*: "Satanic cults! Every hour, every day, their ranks are growing. Estimates are there are over one million Satanists in this country. The majority of them are linked in a highly organized, very secret network. From small towns to large cities, they've attracted police and FBI attention to their satanic ritual child abuse, child pornography, and grisly satanic murder. The odds are this is happening in your town."<sup>13</sup> Viser doesn't mention that in a later documentary (CNBC, December 12, 1995) Rivera rejected the "remembered memories therapy movement" of many so-called childhood victims as "a bunch of crap" that had resulted in many innocent people being convicted of abuse and going to prison or losing jobs.

Rivera's later view agrees with that of folklorists, who track urban legends such as those my friend the newspaper editor described for me. Everyone has heard them, and folklorists suggest that the Satanic cult stories are a variation on the evil corporation legends such as McDonald's owning worm farms in Mexico to use in the Big Mac or Procter & Gamble being major contributors to the Church of Satan. Bromley and Ainsley find that "although there is no credible evidence of a satanic cult conspiracy, and therefore no evidence of related nefarious behavior by satanic churches, the current moral panic has rejuvenated public concern and reconfigured conceptions of Satanism."<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, one can hardly deny that sub-rosa Satanic groups have existed and do exist today in some form. Sub-rosa groups are, after all, sub-rosa and investigating them can be difficult. DeWitt Bodeen, scriptwriter for the Satanic cult film *The Seventh Victim* (1943) and perhaps a more reliable source than urban legend, told of visiting a Satanic sabbat in the 1940s. The cult members he met do not seem very dangerous in his telling, however. In an interview conducted many years after production of *The Seventh Victim*, Bodeen recalled that producer Val Lewton asked him to infiltrate a Satanic cult to get background for the film. The studio publicity department found such a group in New York and got him admission to attend a meeting on the condition that he would not speak. Many years later, Bodeen said: "I must say that they were exactly like the devil worshipers in *Rosemary's Baby*. It was even in the same neighborhood on

the West Side that they used in the film. It was during the war [World War II] and I would have hated to be Hitler with all the spells they were working against him. They were mostly old people, and they were casting these spells while they knitted and crocheted. A bunch of tea-drinking old ladies and gentlemen sitting there muttering imprecations against Hitler.”<sup>15</sup> But history tells us of more dangerous groups such as the Manson family, Satanists by self-perception. Also, police departments in major cities abound with stories of alienated teenagers stoned on drugs and hormones enacting Satanic rites, perhaps inspired by heavy-metal rock music.

Regardless of whether Satanic cults are fact or folklore, however, they are fine fodder for horror film plots. In fact, the rituals described in the tell-all books sound much like those that writers and directors have put on movie screens. Characteristically, then, history, myth, urban legend, and purported biographies have created for the Satanic Mass, sometimes called a Sabbat, a body of sign and symbol readily adaptable for the screen. They include:

- Reversal or desecration of elements of the Christian mass and holy objects including a baptism in blood and animal, or perhaps human sacrifice
- A Eucharist of blood or urine
- Celebrants dressed as priests and nuns and often a church as setting for the sabbat
- Desecration of *The Bible*, the cross or holy objects
- A ritual orgy
- The upside-down cross
- The five-pointed star reversed, with the peak looking down and the two horns pointed up (if the star is pointed up, the symbol falls into the general occult category and often worn by Wiccans and not the Satanic)
- Arcane-looking and usually meaningless runes
- A goat’s head (referring to the Goat of Mendes<sup>16</sup>)
- The numbers 666, the sign of the Beast from Revelation

All of these elements of the Satanic tradition have worked their way into the popular imagination from earlier fiction such as that of Dennis Wheatley and J.-K. Huysmans. And, of course, it is all quite scary and great material for the horror film. The patterns of sign, symbol, and allusion that have developed in the Satanic film add to the atmospheric element that has been central to the gothic from the beginning. Sign and symbol contribute to one of the fundamental elements of terror in the Satanic film: paranoia and fear of the Other.

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATES:  
SATANIC CULTS IN FILM: *THE BLACK CAT*, *THE SEVENTH VICTIM*, *THE DEVIL RIDES OUT*, *TO THE DEVIL A DAUGHTER*, *THE DEVIL'S RAIN*, *THE NINTH GATE*, AND *BLESS THE CHILD*

A common element of many of the Satanic films is conspiracy by a shadowy group of Satanists, working for their own ends against society, be it to extend their lives, gain magical power, win a great sex life, or bring the Antichrist. It's a conspiracy! The concept has always had broad appeal: fear of a group of Others, people who look just like us and fit into society but have their own agenda that is destructive of our values. In the late eighteenth century, popular belief in Europe had it that the Illuminati, a powerful group of people in high places who operated behind the scenes, schemed to bring about the French Revolution. The Anti-Mason political party in the U.S. gained broad support by claiming that Free Masons conspired to overthrow the government. Then, of course, Senator Joseph McCarthy gained enormous political power for a time by convincing the American public that Communists were subverting the U.S. from within. Paranoia about the hidden Other works well not only for politicians to gain power, but for horror films as well. The Satanic cult plot is rich in the paranoid fear of the Other.

The Other and Otherness are important concepts of postmodern criticism. Approaches vary. French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan's "return to Freud" writings on the Other/other as stages of development inspired ways of analyzing literature and film. Feminist and Marxist critics have applied the concept more narrowly to social issues. Michael Wood, for instance, writes, "Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with . . . either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it."<sup>17</sup> Wood and other critics see the Other as the disenfranchised and marginalized. In the Satanic film, however, the dread of the Other is a central element of horror, and this fear has important implications for any society because of the potential for intolerance and violence against groups or individuals perceived as threats to our personal group. Sociobiologists would suggest it is a capacity for response built into our very human nature.

Sociobiology and the related field of evolutionary psychology have inspired heated debate. E. O. Wilson's books have been at the center of the controversy. Wilson begins from the Darwinian concepts of survival of the fittest and natural selection that have led to the evolu-

tion of species as they adapt to environments. But Wilson goes a step beyond Darwin in suggesting that evolution created not only our physical form but much of our behavior. Certain kinds of behavior, they posit, would have been adaptive throughout our species' past, aiding in its survival; and a propensity toward these behaviors is part of our genetic heritage. While Wilson's findings have been hotly attacked, there has been a growing acceptance that at least some of our unthought responses might be based on primitive drives developed by millions of years of adaptive evolution.

One important human trait in sociobiologists' scheme of things is territoriality. Like other species, they posit, humans are territorial animals. Wilson defines territory as "one of the variants of aggressive behavior," and a "territory" is "an area occupied more or less exclusively either directly by overt defense or indirectly through advertisement."<sup>18</sup> In *The Territorial Imperative*, Robert Ardrey establishes territoriality as one of the most common instinctual responses across species boundaries. Ardrey's position on the matter is rather extreme, even among sociobiologists, but it makes the essential case for territorial behavior: "We act as we do for reasons of our evolutionary past, not our cultural present, and our behavior is as much a mark of our species as is the shape of a human thigh bone or the configuration of nerves in a corner of the human brain. If we defend the title to our land or the sovereignty of our country, we do it for reasons no different, no less innate, no less ineradicable, than do lower animals. The dog barking at you from behind his master's fence acts for a motive indistinguishable from that of his master when the fence was built."<sup>19</sup>

Those who study territory and aggression agree that, as Wilson says, we are "strongly predisposed to respond with unreasoning hatred to external threats"—specifically to our territory. Wilson goes on: "we tend to fear deeply the actions of strangers and to solve problems of conflict with aggression. These learning rules are most likely to have evolved during the past hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution and, thus, to have conferred a biological advantage on those who conformed to them with the greatest fidelity."<sup>20</sup>

From the sociobiology perspective, distrust of the Other and fierce loyalty to our own clan or tribe would have been adaptive behavior for our antediluvian ancestors. Thus, a whisper within still prompts us to fear the Other, a territorial invader, someone not of our "tribe." The chaos among tribes and clans in Africa and the Middle East as well as the genocide in the former Yugoslavia offer stark examples of the irrational hatred that can still be generated against the Other. Hate crimes and racial divisions in our own country seem but lesser manifestations of the same social phenomenon. Sign and symbol from the

Satanic film, generate fear of an Other who invades our society (or territory) as a signal ingredient of the pleasures of vicarious horror.

*The Black Cat* (1934) offers the earliest example still available to viewers that we can discuss as the Satanic cult film. The film alludes to Edgar Allan Poe's classic horror story without using any of it. But never mind: it has the two Universal Studio's franchise actors, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, playing in peak form. Director Edgar Ulmer (who co-wrote the script with Peter Rurick) gives the film an unusual look derivative of German expressionist cinema.

A young newly married couple, Peter and Joan Alison, meet Dr. Vitus Werdegast (Lugosi), a psychiatrist, on the Orient Express as it crosses Central Europe. When the three switch to a bus, it crashes, and Werdegast takes the couple to the home of Hjalmar Poelzig (Karloff), which is built on the foundations of a fortress where 10,000 soldiers died during World War I. As the plot moves along, we learn that Werdegast has planned all along to kill Poelzig, who had taken his wife during the war, convincing her that Vitus was dead. Poelzig, we gradually learn, is a Satanist. Werdegast tells Peter and Joan, "Did you ever hear of Satanism, the worship of the Devil, of evil? Hjalmar is a great modern priest of this ancient cult."

There are many plot twists and unexplained details. We see a room with what seem to be posed dead bodies of women, made lifelike by a skilled taxidermist. Black cats appear occasionally (the only connection with the Poe story) to frighten Werdegast, who has a cat phobia. The cult plot emerges when we find that Poelzig's Satanic coven plans to sacrifice a virgin during their ceremony, and Joan Alison qualifies. Never mind that she's married and on her honeymoon with her husband; she's a virgin, we're told, and a prime candidate for Satan. We see a brief scene with the assembled coven in traditional Satanic robes.

The plot is the least interesting part of this early Satanic film. Karloff and Lugosi are fun to watch, of course, but the screen ambience is Ulmer's lasting achievement. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Ulmer mentions his experience in working on design for director Peter Wegener's *The Golem* (1916), which no doubt contributed to the expressionist look of *The Black Cat*. He said that the idea for the fortress comes from his discussions with Czech writer Gustav Meyrinck (who wrote the novel *Golem* on which the film version was based), during which Meyrinck contemplated a play about Doumont, a French fortress that the Germans shelled in the World War I, killing thousands.<sup>21</sup> Doumont, then, is the model for the fortress in the film. It also resembles the haunted castle of the gothic tradition that evolved into the haunted house of more recent times, a setting to which viewers have been conditioned to respond.

But the film also has connections with the early twentieth-century occult. Schreck cites a news report from the time before the film was made of a young couple who visited the infamous Aleister Crowley's Abbey of Thelema in Sicily, where, according to testimony in a court trial, they were involved in occult rites including a black cat.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps a more important occult connection, however, involves the work and life of Hans Poelzig, German architect and occultist, after whom Ulmer named his character in the film. Schreck writes that Ulmer and Poelzig worked together on the expressionistic set of *The Golem* and Ulmer was influenced by Poelzig's mystical vision of architecture. Poelzig believed that buildings were alive and emitted a music that could be heard by the initiated, and he and his wife consorted with fashionable mystics and conducted spiritualist séances.<sup>23</sup> Brunas and Weaver report that Ulmer intended a much darker vision of Satanism in *The Black Cat* with a more explicit ritual orgy, but Universal Studios heads decreed that such scenes be excised.<sup>24</sup>

*The Black Cat* may be the first Satanic cult film, but it is not typical of those to follow. Urban legend and history have conspired to create levels of paranoia about the Other in Satanic cult stories that Ulmer's film provides in only mild form, for the most part, based on the contrast of the strangeness of the setting and the wholesomeness of the Alisons. A somewhat more recent Satanic film that builds on fear of the Other also predates the cult hysteria of the 1970s and 1980s. *The Seventh Victim* (1943), directed by Mark Robson under the guidance of legendary producer Val Lewton, is another early version of the Satanic cult film. Lewton specialized in low-budget horror films for RKO with such unpromising titles as *Cat People* and *The Leopard Man*. After having ridiculous titles dictated to him by studio executives, Lewton worked with writers to produce literate scripts and with directors in establishing a signature excellence in the use of light and shadow to create suggestive ambience. The result is a series of low-budget classics that create unease in the viewer. Lewton films specialize in scenes that make us jump through the power of suggestion rather than on-screen violence. *The Seventh Victim* is one his finest and it introduces the shadowy sub-rosa Satanic cult that hides among us, a theme that plucks the strings of our unconscious dread of the Other.

The premise is that Mary Gibson, who looks to be about eighteen (a young Kim Hunter), is a student at a girls' school when she learns that her sister Jaqueline (Jean Brooks), who paid her tuition in the past, has disappeared. Mary leaves school in search of her sister. On leaving, she embarks on a journey reminiscent of Pilgrim's visit to Vanity Fair in John Bunyan's seventeenth-century classic tale *The Pil-*

*grim's Progress*, but her journey is on the mean streets of New York. Jaqueline owned a beauty parlor and cosmetics concern, but she has disappeared; and the new owner claims to know nothing about her. Mary's sleuthing leads her to a room that Jaqueline had rented over a restaurant, furnished only with a chair and a hanging noose.

More sleuthing leads Mary to Gregory Ward (Hugh Beaumont),<sup>25</sup> who at first claims to be Jaqueline's fiancé but who we later learn is her husband. He has not seen Jaqueline for some time. Along the way Mary meets a private detective who agrees to help her. They break into the beauty parlor Mary had visited; and in a wonderfully Lew-tonesque scene, the PI fearfully walks down a hall, moving from light into shadow, goes into a room, and a few minutes later staggers out of the dark into light. He had been stabbed and dies.

Mary flees, of course, and we gradually learn that Jaqueline is hiding out after consulting a psychiatrist, Dr. Judd (Tom Conway). He had tried to help Jaqueline, and he and Jason Hogue, a poet, eventually find her. Jaqueline fears for her life because she had revealed to Judd that she belonged to the Palladists, a secret Satanic cult. The script writer may have found references to the Palladists in the writings of Leo Taxil and Charles Hacks, who, in their violently antiprottestant and antiMasonic book *The Devil in the Nineteenth Century*, identify the Palladians as the masterminds behind the Masonic Lodge, which they see as the center of Satanism.<sup>26</sup> In scenes of confrontations with the cult and of flight and pursuit, Mary eventually becomes the title character, the seventh victim of the cult. Lewton eschews the traditional signs of Satanism, reversed pentagrams and crosses, the Goat of Mendes, and other symbols, but the visual ambience of light and darkness suggest the battle of good and evil that is the film's milieu.

Lewton's film is the first to establish the Satanic cult as Others hidden and invisible in our society but wielders of great power for evil. At the end of the film, Judd and Hogue confront the Palladists in their search for Jaqueline, and the discourse reflects the Otherness of the cult. Hogue sneers, "The Devil worshippers! The worshippers of evil! . . . You're a poor, wretched group of people who have taken a wrong turning." The cult leader responds, "If I prefer to believe in Satanic majesty and power, who can deny me?" and asks for proof that good is superior to evil. Dr. Judd replies by repeating "simple, half forgotten words from childhood" as a response, lines from the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The scene is, of course, a sop to an audience that would have been solidly Christian. But both the lines and the film's lighting, which cast shadow on the Palladists with full light on Judd and Hogue, establish the Otherness of the cult.



Like most of Lewton's films, *The Seventh Victim* rises above formula by suggesting violence without visualizing it. Moreover, the film has literary allusions galore, including lines on the opening screen from John Donne's Holy Sonnet VII ("At the round earth's imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets angels . . ."), a poem on death and resurrection. The screen then fades into a stained glass at the school emblazoned with the same line. We hear a teacher declining the French verb *chercher*, to search, which is Mary's task in New York. And as she leaves the school we hear a girl's voice singing the last stanza of Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus":

Build thee more stately mansions, my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll;  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving this outgrown shell by life's unresting sea.

The lines fit the meditative mood of the film, as we learn that Jacqueline, whose death wish caused her to rent a room and furnish it with noose and chair, wants nothing more than to leave her life. Critics of Lewton's films have pointed out his use of Freudian imagery and concepts in his films, and J. P. Telotte sees Mary's life and suicide as an example, a "subtle manifestation of an equally universal [according to Freud] manifestation, the death instinct."<sup>27</sup>

The cult hysteria and McCarthyite fear of hidden enemies had not begun when Lewton produced *The Seventh Victim*. In 1968, the Hammer Studios in Britain, which specialized in the horror genre, made *The Devil Rides Out*, adapted from Dennis Wheatley's 1935 novel of the same title. McCarthy was gone by the time the film was released, but his legacy—paranoid fear of the Other as Communist subversion—was not forgotten. Wheatley was rabidly anti-Communist, as he revealed in many of his novels, even those written in the 1930s. Therefore, we can see his Satanic cult in both novel and film as metaphor for the Communist threat, as perceived by the general public of the 1950s and 1960s. Like Communism, in this view, Satanism subverts traditional values. Also like Communism in the popular mind, Satanic cults convert people, brainwash them into new identities as Others, and operate in secret to achieve their ends: invaders even more terrifying because they operate from within. These elements of Wheatley's ideology and that of those who fed the Red Scare survive in the translation of *The Devil Rides Out* to film.

Duke de Richleau, played by Hammer Studios' stalwart Christopher Lee, discovers that his friend Simon Aron (Patrick Mower) is about to be initiated into a cult of Satanists along with Tanith (Niké Arrighi), a young woman who becomes the romantic interest for the duke's young friend Rex. The rest of the film has the duke and Rex (Leon Greene) fighting for Simon's and Tanith's souls. The doughty heroes eventually rescue the pair, as well as Peggy, the young daughter of Richleau's niece Marie Eaton, whom Mocata (Charles Grey), the high priest of the cult, had snatched for sacrifice, from a Black Mass with enough Satanic sign and symbol to satisfy any devotee of urban legend.<sup>28</sup>

The film establishes the story elements and visual image of the Satanic cult that were to appear in so many films to follow as well as the portrayal of the shadowy Others operating outside the notice of society. The duke tells Rex, "The power of evil is more than just a superstition. It is a living force that can be tapped at any given moment of the day or night." As in most cults, Mocata's followers must take a new identity and name, shuffling off the old ones. The duke explains: "In order to become a follower of the so-called Left-Hand Path, one has to be re-baptized in the cause and take the name of some past notable of the occult." We see a room where the cult meets, decorated with a carpet featuring a goat's head, the Goat of Mendes. Later, when he needs to protect his friends, the duke draws the magic circle that in occult tradition shields those within. In the scene when the evil Mocata hypnotizes the duke's niece Marie, he tells her, paraphrasing Aleister Crowley, "In magic, there is neither good nor evil. It is merely a science, the science of causing change to occur by means of one's will." The lines are an allusion to the oft-quoted definition of magic from Crowley, "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will."<sup>29</sup> Then we see the cult meeting to initiate Simon and Tanith. Mocata sacrifices a goat, the blood of which will be the Satanic sacramental wine, and the group goes into a laundered version of the ritual Satanic cult orgy.

After Mocata has kidnapped Peggy and is about to sacrifice the child in the presence of a goat-headed Satan, Marie, who is present as one of the rescuers, unconsciously recites a line that she remembers: "They only who love without desire shall have power granted to them in the darkest hour." For no identifiable reason in the film, her spoken words vanquish Satan and Mocata. The novel specifies that she recalls the lines as coming from *The Red Book of Appin*.<sup>30</sup> But in novel and film, her words produce one of the "Lords of Light," who saves the day. The novel describes him as a spirit who is "nearing perfection after many lives," surely one of the guides from the Spiritualist tradi-

tion of the 1930s. The conclusion reminds us of the New Age soon to be born: spirit guides as well as detachment from desire.

According to Christopher Lee, Dennis Wheatley was delighted with the film version of his novel. Indeed, as Peter Hutchings points out, the film reflects values that match Wheatley's political conservatism, "an unwavering faith in and identification with an essentially patriarchal power and authority," as exemplified in the opposition of two older men, Richleau and Mocata.<sup>31</sup> The younger characters waver back and forth between them, and the women characters operate outside the masculine field of reason from the deep unconscious to resolve the conclusion. It is the film's powerful male figure who protects younger characters from the incursion of the also powerful male Other, a plot pattern that recurs in Wheatley's novels. Thus, the novelist liked *The Devil Rides Out* so much that he gave Hammer Studios the rights to film *To the Devil a Daughter*.<sup>32</sup>

The novel, published in 1953, tells of a plot by a Satanist group to sacrifice a young woman who is both a virgin and born at just the right astrological moment for her sacrifice to bring maximum power. The film version (released in 1976) shares almost nothing with the novel, except that the plot involves a demon, Astaroth, one of the fallen angels. A twenty-four-minute commentary on the DVD version of *To the Devil a Daughter* has interviews with various people involved in the making of the film, with extensive comments by Christopher Lee. According to Lee, Director Peter Sykes read the novel and judged it unfilmable. The script, or rather scripts, as the initial one was discarded, were works in progress, with the final scenes being shot while the opening ones were rewritten. Then the finale had to be recut to match preceding incidents, resulting in a seriously flawed film that left Dennis Wheatley vowing to have no more to do with Hammer, which proved to be an empty threat as both Hammer and Wheatley expired soon after the film's release.

The film version's plot has Catherine Beddows (an eighteen-year-old Nastassja Kinski), a young woman raised in a nunnery operated by the Satanist and false priest Father Michael (Christopher Lee) as the virgin in peril. He's raising her to become an avatar of Astaroth, one of the demons from Satanic lore. But Henry Beddows (Denholm Elliott), the man Father Michael has told Catherine is her father, calls on occult novelist John Verney (Richard Widmark) to help his daughter. The evil Satanists murder various people, but Verney manages to save Catherine.

The film has the usual array of occult symbols from the Satanic tradition, including the protective circle and inverted pentagram, Latin chants from Lee in his spell-casting, monastic-looking Satanic cere-

monial garb. It even gets the Astaroth image right, as he is pictured in medieval iconography as having a snake in his hand, and Father Michael magics a serpent into the hand of the terrified Beddows. The closing scenes are so garbled as to be unintelligible. But as is the case in many Satanic cult films, paranoia inspired by the perception that there might be an unseen Other posing under the most respectable of identities (priests and nuns) is a significant factor in the horror plot.

The Black Mass and Satanic coven plot appear again in *The Devil's Rain* (1975). The film is something of an anomaly in that it links a distinguished cast, including Ernest Borgnine, Eddie Albert, William Shatner, Tom Skerritt, Ida Lupino, and even an appearance by a young John Travolta in a bit part, with a truly silly plot. However, the film ladles on generous amounts of both cult paranoia and the sign and symbol of the Satanic film. Also, *The Devil's Rain* has interesting connections with contemporary Satanic groups.

In a flashback, we learn that Puritans had burned at the stake members of a coven led by Jonathan Corbis (Borgnine), with Corbis vowing to return. Sure enough, he does, though just how he accomplishes his return is never clear. When the film moves to the present, Mark Preston (Shatner) is outraged at the death of his father who, transformed into an eyeless zombie, collapses at the front door of their home, and proceeds to melt. The film portrays much Wicked Witch of the West-style melting, as it seems those whose souls have been stolen by Corbis ooze slime and turn to liquid when they die. Mark, who blames Corbis, finds the cult leader in the old church where he and his coven of zombies practice their horrid rites. He also discovers that his mother (Lupino) has been taken by the group. Most of the action of the remainder of the film occurs in the church, in legend the location of choice for the Black Mass. The plot focuses on Corbis trying to recover the coven's Book of Shadows (a record of their ceremonies and spells), which Mark Preston seems to have had, while Mark's brother Tom (Skerritt), a behavioral scientist who has come to town when he hears of his father's death, opposes the evildoers. Corbis's spells can trap souls in bottles where they are constantly doused with rain (hence the title), and their bodies become eyeless zombies. Since the eyes are traditionally the windows to the soul, the suggestion is that the bodies are soulless.

The film is interesting not for its artistic merit but for its portrayal of ritual Satanic coven activities. The incantations come from both the Church of Satan and the Temple of Set. Anton LaVey gets credit as technical advisor and did a walk-on. Michael Aquino, High Priest of the Temple of Set, told me in an e-mail that Borgnine's invocation comes from "Ceremony of the Nine Angles" in LaVey's *Satanic Rit-*

*uals*,<sup>33</sup> apparently written by Aquino when he was a member of LaVey's group. Corbis even spouts LaVey's philosophy, crying, "Who denies pleasure, denies life."

Roman Polanski's 1999 film *The Ninth Gate* combines the cult plot with the look of film noir from the hard-boiled detective genre. Polanski creates a dark and threatening ambience and a screen world populated with morally bankrupt characters ready to do anything for power. Loosely based on Arturo Pérez-Reverte's fine novel *The Club Dumas*, the film eschews explicit supernatural manifestations. Rather, Polanski creates a screen environment that suggests the metaphysical evil that drives the characters and plot. The dreaded Satanic cult is an important element in both film and novel, though in Pérez-Reverte's version it is a red herring.

The opening sequence establishes Dean Corso (Johnny Depp) as an unscrupulous rare book buyer. Then a collector, tycoon Boris Balkan (Frank Langella), who specializes in works on Satanism, hires Corso to track down two copies of *The Nine Gates of the Kingdom of Shadows*, a seventeenth-century work that supposedly includes part of an earlier book written by Satan himself. Balkan tells Corso that the works "form a kind of Satanic riddle. Correctly interpreted with the aid of the original text and sufficient inside information, they're reputed to conjure up the Prince of Darkness in person." Three copies of the work exist, and Balkan has one. But he wants Corso to find the other two and determine which copy is authentic.

And so begins a sort of film noir detective story, with Corso becoming deeply enmeshed in a Satanic network while tracking down the other copies. Corso gets help from a young woman (Emmanuelle Seigner), known only as The Girl. A minion of Satan, she turns up at opportune moments to help him. The film makes The Girl's Satanic connection clear enough through her actions, but never gives her a name. Arturo Pérez-Reverte's wonderfully intertextual novel, however, leaves no doubt of her identity. There she tells Corso of Satan's lot: "Imagine him. . . . The most beautiful of the fallen angels plotting alone in his empty palace. . . . He clings desperately to a routine he despises, but which at least allows him to hide his grief. To hide his failure. . . . He misses heaven."<sup>34</sup> In another passage she describes a very Miltonic war in Heaven. Also, in the novel, she calls herself Irene Adler, obviously an assumed identity because it is the name of The Woman in the Sherlock Holmes story "A Scandal in Bohemia," and lists her address as 221B Baker Street in London, Holmes's address. The film truncates her role in the novel. But with her help, Corso learns that the real secret of raising Satan lies in a combination of the illustrations in the three books.

In the film, the Satanic coven plot begins when Corso learns from Baroness Kessler, who owns one of the books, of the existence of The Order of the Silver Serpent, which is a model for the sub-rosa Satanic cult of urban legend. It is “a kind of witch coven,” Kessler says. “For centuries they have met to read from this book [*The Nine Gates*] and worship the Prince of Darkness. Today they have degenerated into a social club of bored millionaires and celebrities who use its meetings to indulge their jaded sexual appetites.” Sure enough, her description of the cult proves accurate. Depp and The Girl track down their location. They make their way into the assembled crowd of hooded, pentagram-bedecked Satanists and see Balkan arrive. “I alone,” he tells them, “have grasped its [*The Nine Gates*] secrets. I alone have fathomed the Master’s grand design. I alone am worthy to enjoy the fruits of that discovery, absolute power to determine my own destiny.” The final sentence seems another echo of the LaVey philosophy.

Corso has become obsessed with attaining the power the book promises. At the end, The Girl tells Corso that he’s off the hook for all the killings. “What more do you want?” she asks. “You know what,” he replies. In the tradition of Faust, Corso and Balkan want power beyond that of humankind.

*The Ninth Gate* is one of the better Satanic films. Polanski puts minimum explicit violence on screen and only hints of the supernatural until the final scene. But the dark, moody ambience and the background music communicate the essence of hidden spiritual evil. Moreover, Corso is led from a relatively small-time hustler in the rare book trade to the Faustian desire for power expressed by Balkan when he says as he prepares to summon Satan, “I’m entering uncharted territory, taking the road to equality with God.” At the fade, Corso has followed the road to finding Lucifer as he walks into a glare of light: perhaps an ironic reversal (in a film that abounds in ironies) of walking into the light as described by Moody, but appropriate on another level because the name Lucifer means, after all, Lord of Light.<sup>35</sup>

*Bless the Child* (2000) continues the Satanic cult plot as metaphor, linking it to specific occult groups, Others seen as powerful and subversive enemies. In the film, Maggie O’Connor (Kim Basinger) is a nurse, whose drug-addicted sister Jenna (Angela Bettis) shows up at her doorstep with an eight-day-old daughter, who just happens to have been born under the influence of a star that had not appeared since the birth of Christ. So no viewer should be surprised that the child, Cody (Holliston Coleman), whom Maggie raises when Jenna disappears, should have special abilities, including psychokinesis.

The Christ parallel continues when Jenna returns with Eric Stark

(Rufus Sewell), a TV personality and author who founded New Dawn, supposedly a self-help group that rebuilds the lives of addicts, alcoholics, and other down-and-outers. Eventually, Stark and Jenna more or less kidnap Cody, and the remainder of the film has Maggie and policeman John Travis (Jimmy Smits) trying to get her back. Stark, it turns out, is a Satanist who knows of Cody's special abilities and wants to either turn them to the service of his master or kill her because, as a cult dropout tells Maggie, she is destined to bring many people to God. The deaths of six-year-olds reported at the start of the film allude to the biblical "murder of the innocents" episode, making Stark not only a Satanist but the equivalent of Herod, who had ordered children killed when the Wise Men reported the birth of the king of the Jews (Matthew chapter 2).

Stark's New Dawn is a cult, with widespread members and power to trigger paranoia in the audience. "New Dawn" suggests Golden Dawn, the occult group from the nineteenth century that exists today but has no connection with Satanism; and the power of the New Dawn reminds us of contemporary groups that some view as cults. Their literature carries slogans such as "There is no God but you" and "Do what you will. Will what you do," exaggerated versions of the philosophy taught by modern Satanist organizations but perhaps more specifically to the est movement. A priest to whom Maggie goes for help says of the cult, "Eric Stark and other groups like his are spreading a powerful message: God does not really exist. Therefore we can all make up our own rules." The cult practices the familiar rituals from legends about Satanism, including human sacrifice, and members sport occult symbols as tattoos.

The film plays on the dread of cults generated by popular books from the 1970s and 1980s, focusing the viewer on the primal fear of the powerful Other. There can be no more primal drive than protection of children, as they represent the continuation of the species. The "Murder of the Innocents" practiced by Stark's cult is more than a Christian allusion; these murders and the attempt to subvert Cody, bringing the child from "our" tribe to that of the Other, is a situation well suited to generate vicarious horror from primal response.

"AND I SAW A BEAST RISING OUT OF THE SEA":  
THE ANTICHRIST IN FILM

Inextricably linked to the Satanic coven plot, the Antichrist story seems the most popular of the story lines generated by the Satanic occult. The tradition of the Antichrist may have come to Christianity

by way of Judaic thought (especially the Book of Daniel). But St. Paul fully works out his coming and the end times in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2. He describes three stages of the apocalypse: the "leaven of iniquity," which brings about a revolt or a "great apostasy," followed by the coming of "the man of sin." The term Antichrist does not appear in Paul, but the meaning seems clear. The Revelation of St. John the Divine develops the concept more fully. John writes, "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea. . . . and to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority" (13:1). The Dragon, Satan, will put the mark of 666 on the palm or forehead of all who follow him: "Let him who hath understanding count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred three score and six" (13:18). The Antichrist is surely the ultimate Other. He (or she, depending on the film) is not only Other, but the leader of the Others. He represents a territorial invader and generates the paranoia that is so much a part of the Satanic horror film. And in many of the Antichrist films, he is symbolic of the hated New World Order.

"HE CAME UP FROM HELL AND BEGAT A SON . . . SATAN IS HIS FATHER": *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, *THE SENTINEL*, *PRINCE OF DARKNESS*, *DEVIL'S ADVOCATE*, AND *CONSTANTINE*

Roman Polanski's 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*, based very closely on Ira Levin's novel, is the best adaptation of the Antichrist story, and, as is so often the case, it melds with the cult plot and adds sign and symbol from the Satanic tradition. Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse move into a lovely New York apartment building, the Bramford, a place with "a high incidence of unpleasant things happening," as the landlord describes its past. Indeed, Rosemary and Guy hear spooky chants and a flute from the apartment next door on their first night.

Guy (John Cassavetes) is an actor, just getting started. Rosemary (Mia Farrow) wants to stay at home and have children. Their neighbors, Minnie and Roman Castevet, are nosy and invite the young couple for dinner. Roman turns out to know a great deal about the theater. While Minnie and Rosemary wash dishes after dinner, we get a great shot through the doorway of the kitchen showing smoke rising from the other room where Guy and Roman enjoy cigars and confer. We do not see or hear the men themselves, only swirling smoke, reminding us of Hell.

Good things start happening for Guy. His career suddenly blossoms, and he and Rosemary decide it is time to have a baby. On the



big night, when they plan their first attempt at procreational sex, Minnie delivers a mousse for dessert, apparently drugged. But Rosemary doesn't like the taste and manages to dispose of some of it. Thus she is partially awake but delusional when a coven of Satanists arrive and invoke their master, who mounts and impregnates Rosemary while Guy is a part of the group watching.

And so begins her pregnancy. Guy and the Castevets insist that she see a new doctor, Dr. Saperstein (Ralph Bellamy), who, Rosemary comes to believe, is a member of a Satanic cult with the Castevets. Rosemary becomes more and more ill during her pregnancy and suspicious of the Castevets. She gets a book on the occult from a friend, and she tells Guy what she's learned, which is essentially urban legend about Satanists: "There were covens in Europe. That's what they're called, The Congregation. Covens in Europe, in America, and in Australia, and they have one right here. That's the whole bunch. The parties with singing, and the flute, and the chanting, those are esbats, they're sabbats. . . . Read what they do, Guy. They use blood in their rituals, and the blood that has the most power is baby's blood, and they don't just use the blood, they use the flesh too."

Hysterical, Rosemary tries to escape, but she's eventually trapped in her apartment by Guy and Saperstein where she goes into labor and bears the child, which Guy tells her was born dead. But Rosemary hears a baby crying in the Castevets' apartment next door and goes there through a panel she had discovered in her closet. On the other side she finds the assembled cult, with the child in a black-draped cradle. When she looks into the cradle, she cries, "What have you done to it? What have you done to his eyes?" Roman responds, "He has his father's eyes. . . . Satan is his father, not Guy. He came up from Hell and begat a son of mortal woman. Satan is his father and his name is Adrian." The assembled coven cries, "God is dead. Satan lives. The year is One."

*Rosemary's Baby* works well as a horror film through ambience rather than gore. Occult symbols and references abound, especially in the final scenes. The Castevets' apartment has several pictures of holy scenes, with abominations painted in. The black-draped cradle for the child has an upside-down cross hanging from the front. The cult uses victims' personal items for spells to blind Guy's acting rival and kill their enemies, a procedure which, according to Rosemary's book, is possible through "United Mental Force," of which she says, "Some cultures believed that a personal possession of the victim is necessary, and spells cannot be cast without one of the victim's belongings." The description matches legends about black magic.

But did it all really happen? The film has spawned a variety of in-

terpretations. From a psychological perspective, the supernatural events could simply be Rosemary's delusion, possibly caused by a mental breakdown due to illness and pregnancy. On the other hand, Rosemary does seem beset by implacable Others, Satanists on the literal level but on another level perhaps the forces of society. Lucy Fisher writes that *Rosemary's Baby* "heralds both the birth of horror and the horror of birth in the modern cinema. . . . It is also a skewed 'Documentary' of the societal and personal turmoil regularly attending female reproduction."<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, the Others are both a Satanic cult and those in society who represent societal guilt that prods young women toward parenthood and ignores their fears of childbirth. This interpretation as subtext seems plausible, but *Rosemary's Baby* is first and foremost a horror film, whether it be the horror of birth or the horror of the secret penetration of our society by Others. The film certainly privileges a viewing that supports Rosemary's point of view—that Satanic cults exist and that they plot for the return of the Antichrist.<sup>37</sup>

*The Sentinel* (1976) spins off the return of Satan aided by a cult and a horror theme based on the territorial imperative. Milton's *Paradise Lost* furnishes the fictional frame for the invasion from Hell with his story of Satan entering the Garden of Eden. This story line has inspired many a Satanic film in which the feared Other threatens to invade our territory. Opening scenes of *The Sentinel* show priests praying, "Let no evil thing enter in." The scene then shifts to Alison Parker (Cristina Raines), who had attempted suicide when a teenager after she came home and found her father in the midst of an orgy, which a knowledgeable viewer sees as Satanic. She recovers and goes on to a career as a model, and she rents a lovely apartment with suspiciously low rent (Ava Gardner plays the real estate lady in one of her last roles).

Strange things are happening in the apartment. Alison goes into trances. She writes a passage in Latin without previous knowledge of the language. When Michael, her significant other, takes it to a church for translation, he finds it is from *Paradise Lost*, the passage in which the angel Uriel gets his job description from the angel Michael to guard the entrance to Eden after God has created Adam and Eve: "Thy lot is given. Charge and strict watch that to this happy place no evil thing approach or enter."<sup>38</sup> The "evil thing" Michael charges Uriel to exclude from the Garden, of course, is the newly fallen Satan. In her apartment building, Charles Chazen, a nosy and meddling neighbor played by Burgess Meredith, pesters Alison, and she finds the other occupants of the building to be very strange indeed, including a lesbian couple who openly fondle each other and a strange fig-

ure, Father Halloren, a blind priest, who stares out of a window in the top floor of the building.

Ultimately we find that Halloren is the Sentinel, a priest from one of many fictional secret orders in the Satanic film charged with preventing the evil that could emanate from this building into the world. It is apparently the entrance to Hell, and all the tenants are damned souls, brought from Hell by a demon to tempt Alison to suicide and prevent her from becoming the next Sentinel with the passing of Father Halloran. Chazen, the demon, leers at Alison in her temptation scene and tells her, "You are the chosen of the Lord God, the tyrant and our enemy. You are she who is to guard and protect the entrance to this earth." All this is quite Miltonic, with Alison slated to be the new Uriel if she resists the temptation of suicide. The plot is porous with plot inconsistencies, but it offers yet another example of the territorial imperative theme in the horror film. It is also one of many Satanic films concerning defense of territory by guarding an entrance to Hell.

Plot lines in the Satanic film often overlap, which seems especially true of John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness* (1987), another film that adapts the territorial imperative theme and defense of a portal. Based on the onslaught-from-Hell concept, *Prince of Darkness* gives a different spin to the Satanic film and the threat of the Other. It merges the arrival of the Antichrist plot and some technobabble about quantum physics and subatomic particle theory with a dash of H. P. Lovecraft and his stories of the return of the Old Ones, gods who were banished from Earth. Anna Powell notes that Lovecraft's influence on Carpenter is pervasive and that the two artists "share an apocalyptic vision and depict relentless persecution of humans by cosmic demons who plan to invade Earth."<sup>39</sup> Carpenter spins the frame of his story through integrating the invasion from Hell and the Antichrist themes along with demonic possession while providing a thoroughly threatening ambience in a film that has become a cult classic for horror aficionados.

*Prince of Darkness* begins with the death of a priest. Another priest, Father Loomis (Donald Pleasence), discovers that the dead man was the last of yet another filmic secret Church organization, the Brotherhood of Sleep. Loomis finds that the Brotherhood has, for nearly 2,000 years, guarded a container in the basement of a Los Angeles church that holds the liquid essence of the son of Satan. Just how it got to Los Angeles isn't made clear, but the diary of the deceased priest ends with "The Sleeper Awakens," suggesting that the son of Satan is about to be reborn. Loomis also finds a manuscript written in ancient languages—Aramaic, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek—with in-

formation recorded by the Brotherhood. The discovery of a manuscript is a gothic plot device that can be traced to Ann Radcliffe's 1794 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Loomis goes to Professor Birack (Victor Wong), an instructor in physics at a local university, for help. After Birack finally believes in the threat (he is the conventional doubter who has to be convinced), he recruits several graduate students and another professor to go to the church and analyze the vat containing a spinning liquid. Suffice it to say that several of the students become zombies at the command of the son of Satan as he comes alive, and one of them serves as the host that brings him to the physical world.<sup>40</sup> The plot device is a musty one: a group of people brought to a haunted place and cut off from the outside world, with individuals picked by the supernatural force. Behind all conventional action and horror, however, is an interesting alternative spin on Satanism.

Father Loomis sets the tone for the film's frame in the sort of lecture to the assembled students that so often establishes the frame for an occult film: "It's your disbelief that powers him, your stubborn faith in common sense. It allows his deception. He lives in the smallest paths of it [matter], the atom, invisible. He lives in all of it, in the sum of its parts. No prison can hold him now." The priest describes a sort of demonic pantheism. The manuscript left by the Brotherhood tells the story. Satan left his son in a container before he was "somehow banished to the dark side." One of the students, a theologian, knows the languages in which the manuscript is written and tells the others its message: "Christ comes to warn us. He was of extraterrestrial ancestry, but a humanlike race. Finally they [humans] determine that Christ is crazy, but also gaining his power, converting a lot of people to his belief. They kill him. But his disciples keep his secret and hide it from civilization until man could develop a science sophisticated enough to prove that Christ had saved them."

The film waffles in its attitude toward organized religion. When he learns the secrets of the Brotherhood of Sleep, Loomis blames the Church. He says, "Apparently a decision was made to characterize pure evil as a spiritual force even within the darkness in the hearts of men. It was more convenient. In that way, man remained the center of things. A stupid lie. We were salesmen, that's all." But in a role reversal, Birack, the scientist, provides an alternative that more or less fits a theist view: "Suppose there is a universal mind controlling everything—a God willing the behavior of every subatomic particle. Every particle has an anti-particle, its mirror image, its negative side. Maybe this universal mind resides in the mirror image, instead of in

our universe, as we want to believe. Maybe he's [Satan] the antigod, bringing darkness instead of life."

*Prince of Darkness* continues to mix its science with Christianity, or at least a Manichean version of it. Mulvey-Roberts describes the theological implications as similar to Mary's conception of Christ: "the scientific researcher Kelly has been aptly 'chosen' by the Father. . . . This satanic impregnation is the unholy Immaculate Conception of the Anti-Christ."<sup>41</sup> The woman who translates the ancient manuscript mentions a line in it suggesting that a savior would step forward. Then at the end of the film, one of the students becomes a Christ figure, sacrificing her life to keep Satan's son from pulling his father back into this universe. The science theme returns in a dream that all in the church have when they fall asleep showing a vaguely Christlike figure in shadow while a disembodied voice, which eventually identifies itself as a scientist in the future, tries to warn them. The film is something of a muddle in its attempt to join Christianity, science, and H. P. Lovecraft's stories. But it is an interesting muddle and a novel approach to the Antichrist and apocalypse themes, though it eschews the usual sign and symbol of the Satanic tradition.

*Prince of Darkness* also provides an excellent example of a plotline that generates primal response: the efforts of a sturdy band of heroes who defend territory. Evolutionary descendents of territorial conflicts are everywhere visible today in varieties ranging from African tribes whose unreasoning hatreds result in massive genocide to Sunday afternoon NFL confrontations in which spectators listen to the same whisper within as they urge their tribe of highly paid warriors on to greater effort against the invading Others. Wilson compares primitive and civilized territoriality, noting that the former "divide the world into two tangible parts," the near environment and more distant areas, and "This elemental topography makes easier the distinction between enemies who can be attacked and killed and friends who cannot. The contrast is heightened by reducing enemies to frightful and even subhuman status."<sup>42</sup>

Thus, according to a primal traits perspective, in films like *Prince of Darkness* we experience pleasurable vicarious fear at the danger posed to our "tribe," with whom we identify, by the alien invader of our territory. In discussing humanity's instinctive behaviors, Robin Baker writes, "The main thrust of these forces is, however, directed at our *bodies*, not our *consciousness*, though our bodies use our brains to manipulate us into behaving in a way dictated by this programming."<sup>43</sup> So it goes, according to this argument, with our response to the invader, be it in fantasy or real life.

*Devil's Advocate* (1997) offers another method of begetting the

Antichrist—incest. The film has Satan on earth in a profession where one might expect to find him: a lawyer. Kevin Lomax (Keanu Reeves), a small-town attorney, is recruited by a big-city law firm headed by John Milton (Al Pacino). The name is an in-joke on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a favorite allusion in the Satanic film, because the *Devil's Advocate's* Milton really is the Devil. Kevin is a big success in his new job, but his wife, Mary Ann (Charlize Theron), gradually realizes there's something wrong with the wives of the other lawyers, seeing flashes of them as demons. Eventually we learn that Kevin's mother had had an affair with Milton many years ago and that Kevin is Milton's (Satan's) son.

The Satanic plan is that Kevin would procreate with the sexy Christabella (yet another pun with the word translating "beautiful Christ"), Milton's daughter and Kevin's half-sister. Apparently, since they share Satan's genes, their child would be the Antichrist. Milton offers Kevin the world, no doubt an allusion to Satan's offer to Christ from the temptation scenes in the first three Gospels (Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 4). Kevin, horrified at the suicide of his wife, whom Milton had raped, discovers the plot and commits suicide to prevent the birth of the Antichrist. But in a coda, the scene returns to Kevin, again a promising lawyer in the same small town, about to be recruited again by Milton in a reversal of time. The insidious Other of the Satanic film never gives up.

*Constantine* (2005), perhaps because of its lurid graphic novel origin,<sup>44</sup> ranks as one of the most determinedly occult of Satanic films, with plentiful allusions to traditional occult lore and more occult-looking practices made up for the film. It also evokes the horror of territorial invasion by the Other, with a whole new look at the Antichrist. The frame establishes John Constantine (Keanu Reeves in yet another Satanic film) as a born psychic, who as a youth had been driven to attempt suicide because of his gift. He sees demons and angels everywhere around him; "half-breeds," as he calls them. These are the territorial invaders who cause the whisper within of vicarious fear. In the world of the film, the occult side has rules, and these rules are the film's frame.

In the lecture so common to occult films, Constantine explains these rules to Angela Dodson (Rachel Weisz), a police officer who has come to him for help after her sister supposedly commits suicide. But Angela believes her sister was murdered. "What if I told you," Constantine tells her, "that God and the Devil made a wager, a kind of standing bet for the soul of all mankind!" Neither could have direct contact with humans. "That would be the rule, just influence, see who would win." Angels and demons, he says, can't "come through" to

our territory, which the film posits as a sort of Middle Earth, between Heaven and Hell in the medieval Christian (and Tolkienian) tradition.

Angela is the doubter, whose disbelief gives the dramatic reason for the lecture. Constantine establishes the frame and the paranoia theme in a long discussion. "Heaven and Hell are right here, behind every wall, every window. The world behind the world, and we're smack in the middle. Angels and demons can't cross over onto our plane, so instead we get what I call half-breeds, the influence peddlers. They can only whisper in our ears, but a single word can give you courage or turn your favorite pleasure into your worst nightmare. . . . They call it the balance. I call it hypocritical bullshit. So when a half-breed breaks the rules, I deport their sorry ass straight back to Hell." Thus, Constantine should evoke viewer sympathy as a territorial defender. He hopes to make up for the suicide attempt in his youth, during which he had been technically dead and in Hell, by dispatching half-breeds and demons from Earth. His angelic nemesis Gabriel (Tilda Swinton in a wonderful performance) assures him that he won't make it to Heaven. The film gives no justification for the open presence of Gabriel, an archangel, on Earth, by the way, an omission that seems inconsistent with the frame, as real angels and demons are supposed to be excluded from Earth.

Occult paraphernalia abounds throughout the film, the centerpiece being the Spear of Destiny, the spearhead that pierced Christ on the cross, sometime called the Spear of Longinus, for the Roman soldier who wielded it. The opening footage gives us the on-screen message, "He who possesses the Spear of Destiny holds the fate of the world in his hands," followed by "The Spear of Destiny has been missing since the end of World War II." The Spear is indeed laden with occult potential in legend. But it is hardly missing, currently being held at the Hofsburg Treasure House in Vienna. But in *Constantine*, a Mexican laborer finds it.

The Devil, it turns out, has a son, Mammon, who was conceived in Heaven but born in Hell after the fall of Satan and his angels. In *Paradise Lost*, Mammon is a fallen angel who before he fell walked along the streets of Heaven looking at the streets of gold. He is associated in legend with greed and is definitely not the son of Satan. But in his rebirth in *Constantine*, Mammon has a different identity and plots to set up his own Hell on Earth, with the help of Gabriel, who wants to make life horrible for humans so they would have to earn the grace of God rather than achieve Heaven by finding deathbed forgiveness after a life of sin. The film dredges up yet another fictional lost bit of scripture, a device that appears in many other occult films, the twenty-first "Act" of "Corinthians" (whether from Corinthians 1 or 2 isn't

mentioned), which tells of an apocalypse created by the birth of Mammon through the Spear: "Whatever killed the Son of God will give birth to the son of the Devil."

Of course, Constantine has to prevent the birth to save the world from this territorial invader and Other. In the process, he uses a plethora of occult tools—gold bullets (perhaps an ironic play on the silver bullet for werewolves), special brass knuckles to kill demons, water to reach Hell for visits and holy water to melt the half-breeds. In the occult tradition, water is often mentioned as the medium between the physical and spiritual world, perhaps a concept based on the transformative effect of baptism in Christianity. In this film, water is the pathway for Constantine to visit Hell.

THE ANTICHRIST AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER: EVEN  
PARANOIDS HAVE ENEMIES: *THE OMEN* FILMS, *LEFT BEHIND*,  
*LEFT BEHIND II: TRIBULATION FORCE*, *THE OMEGA CODE*,  
MEGIDDO: THE OMEGA CODE II, AND *LOST SOULS*

*The Omen* (1976), directed by Richard Donner, is an excellent adaptation of the Antichrist plot. Donner accidentally set off a spate of sequels that have considerable appeal for conservative Christians. The sequels and their imitators exploit a source of horror with cultural significance, reactions to what has come to be called the New World Order. For many evangelical Christians, the New World Order is similar to the Communist menace of the 1950s, seen as a malignant and ungodly force in our society that not only threatens individual freedom but subverts Christianity. The more extreme believers see it as a conspiracy to bring the Antichrist. Fear of the New World Order has bubbled down to the level of popular culture, and the element of conspiracy implicit to it make it a prime source for paranoia about invasion of the Other in the horror film.

In this first of the *Omen* franchise, Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) is American ambassador to Italy and later to Great Britain. He accepts what amounts to a foundling from a doctor who tells him that his own child has died at birth. The doctor assures him that "On this night . . . God has given you something." The doctor, who undoubtedly bears the number of The Beast, is being ironic, considering that Thorn has received a burden. As the story develops, the adopted son, Damien, turns out to be the Antichrist, born from a hyena. The scriptwriter may have borrowed the name from Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*, where the arch Satanic villain Mercato's given name is Damien; but it had appeared three years earlier as the first



name of Father Karras in *The Exorcist*. Most films with the Antichrist and cult plot are organized on the central characters'—who are the doubters—and the audiences' gradual realization of the true threat. Such is the case in *The Omen*, where the blood-and-thunder plotline spins off of Thorn's slow realization of the boy's identity and finally his attempt to kill the child, frustrated at the last moment by a policeman's bullet and the producer's desire for sequels.

Blackness is an archetypal symbol for evil. Throughout the film, blackbirds observe and apparently communicate with the source of this evil. But the more specialized and literary symbols in the film are the rottweiler dogs. They first appear to hex Damien's nanny and bring about her suicide so that a demonic agent can replace her. They guard Damien's room, attack Thorn when he finds the bones of his true son, and are generally present as omens of doom and evil throughout the film. The dogs are an appropriate Satanic sign for the "hounds of Hell." The concept probably originates in Greek myth, where we find Cerberus, the three-headed dog with reptilian tail, guarding the gates of Hades and preventing anyone from escaping. Dante adapts the myth in *The Inferno*, placing Cerberus in Circle Three with the gluttons where he stands guard and rends them with his teeth. John Milton also alludes to the Cerberus myth when we find "a cry of hell-hounds never ceasing" barking "with wide Cerberean mouths full loud" and crowding about Sin, Satan's wife and daughter, at the gates of Hell in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>45</sup>

Mrs. Baylock, the nanny, is a shield for the child. She seems part of the vast cult conspiracy, the shadowy Others, established to take care of him—and created by the scriptwriter to inspire paranoia in the audience. We see her in his room after her arrival, saying, "Have no fear little one. I am here to protect you," as he smiles knowingly; and we see a fire burning brightly in the background, offering a rather obvious symbol of her role as agent of Hell. Thorn must fight her when she tries to prevent him from taking Damien to a church to be killed. As they struggle, director Donner adds a visual sign to demonstrate the battle of good and evil. Thorn has outwitted the guarding rottweiler by locking him out. Thus, we see the dog furiously trying to get past the locked door as Thorn and the nanny struggle. On the dog's side, we see a reflection of a cross on the wall. The origin of the reflection is unclear in the film. But it rotates during the scene, perhaps suggesting the ambivalent outcome of the battle of good, the upright cross, and evil, an inverted cross.

An old priest in Israel has told Thorn that the Antichrist, his son, can be killed in only one way, stabbed with one of the Seven Knives of Megiddo. A prophecy in Revelation 16:14–16 tells of the "kings of

the whole world” assembling for the great battle in the last days “at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon.” According to the *Interpreter’s Bible*, Christian tradition has placed Armageddon at the Mount of Megiddo, a place where many great battles have been fought throughout history.<sup>46</sup> The name for the knives, then, suggests the end time, and they would appear in the sequels.

Much of the threatening “feel” of *The Omen* comes from a chant that signals danger from the forces of evil. The Black Mass reverses elements of the Christian Mass, including Latin chants that are turned from holy themes to abominations. In *The Omen*, the “Ave Satani” chant rises when Damien rides his tricycle in figure eights before he bumps the chair that sends Mrs. Thorn over the railing to a fall that injures her and aborts her unborn child. At other points it signals to viewers the presence of evil and imminence of violence. At the end of the film, young Damien, adopted by the president of the United States, turns and smiles evilly into the camera lens as the hymn rolls on. Jerry Goldsmith’s music, adapted from *Carmina Burana*, a thirteenth-century manuscript with six songs and several religious plays, won an Academy Award. Goldsmith uses the music but changed some of the lyrics, including the “Ave Satani” (“Praise Satan”) music at the fade, yet another reversal from the holy to the blasphemous.

That the popular film mirrors the concerns, values, and fears of viewers is a truism among critics. But just what we see in the mirror depends on what we bring to it. Many critics point out the conservative effect of films and other works of popular culture as upholding traditional values. Clarens, for instance, refers to the horror film as a means of “acting out” our fears and bringing catharsis. The horror genre, in this view, is “basically integrative, as conserving and supporting the given institutions of society.”<sup>47</sup> Marxist critic Robin Wood interprets *The Omen* quite differently. He writes that *The Omen* “is about the end of world, but the ‘world’ the film envisages ending is very particularly defined within it: the bourgeois capitalist patriarchal Establishment. . . . *The Omen* would make no sense in a society that was not prepared to enjoy and surreptitiously condone the work of its destruction.”<sup>48</sup>

Whether one agrees with Wood’s interpretation of *The Omen* or not, it hardly applies to the sequels, as they even more clearly establish the horror element as invasion by the Satanic Other and symbolize this Other as the New World Order. These films play on a level of paranoia that is most intense in the conservative Christian community, which sees the New Age not as a variety of disconnected spiritual paths and longings but as an organized movement to bring the Antichrist as ruler. The *Omen* sequels and others share a common

quality: establishment of vicarious fear that the world we know might be abolished and replaced by something much worse. Evangelical Christians have been strident critics of the New Age as a vehicle to establish this New World Order. Constance Cumby, an early writer of exposés, articulates the fear of “an intricate but huge New Age Movement—a movement that includes many thousands of organizations networking through every corner of our globe with the intent of bringing about the New World Order—an order that writes God out of the picture and deifies Lucifer.”<sup>49</sup> Cumby and other conservative Christians find evidence of this Satanic conspiracy in a wide variety of places, from Montessori schools, Whole Earth catalogs, and vegetarian restaurants to holistic health centers, and find more evidence of the conspiracy in the use of words like Spaceship Earth, Global Village, and left brain/right brain.<sup>50</sup> The paranoia of this response is truly palpable and seems quite similar in substance if not in subject to the primal fear of the Other as Communist in the 1950s.

*The Omen* did well at the box office and left its conclusion open-ended with the evil Others triumphant and ready to establish the Antichrist’s rule. *Damien: Omen II* (1978) continues the story with an A-line cast, though William Holden, who plays Richard Thorn, Damien’s adoptive uncle, and Lee Grant, as his wife, were toward the end of their careers. The film builds on the story line of the original and leads to those that follow, establishing more clearly a most dangerous Other and territorial challenge to many if we can see religious persuasion and ideology as territory. *Omen II* follows young Damien (Jonathan Scott-Taylor) through military school, with Richard Thorn gradually discovering the truth, getting the sacrificial daggers from the old priest from the first film, and, of course, since more sequels were in the works, failing to kill Damien at the close. An important part of the film’s horror element is the Other emerging triumphant, prepared to take over the world with Damien in charge of Thorn’s media empire. Those who fear the New World Order are especially suspicious of the media as its tool.

The most potentially interesting dramatic element of *Omen II* is Damien’s gradual realization of who he is, a situation with real possibilities. We see him reading Revelation, chapter 13, late at night while a voice-over intones “and by peace shall he destroy many . . . and he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and no man may buy or sell, save that he hath the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name,” which, of course, is 666. We then see Damien examining his scalp the next morning and finding the numbers under his hair (which Robert Thorn had seen in the first film).

He now knows himself and runs from the house to the dock on the river outside, where he shouts, "Why me?" And that's it. His crisis is over and he's now fully aware of his identity and never seems bothered by it again. In fact, when his cousin and best friend Mark realizes Damien's true nature and shouts at him, "You were born of a jackal!" Damien answers, "Born in the image of the greatest power in the world, the Desolate One, desolate because his greatness was taken from him and he was cast down. But he has risen, Mark—in me." The too brief internal conflict is now over and *Omen II* establishes him as no longer part of "us" but now fully the Other.

*Omen III: The Final Conflict* has the adult Damien, the Antichrist, all grown up (played by Sam Neill) worried about the Second Coming of Christ, which would surely end hopes of his New World Order. A wealthy industrialist, he manipulates things to get himself appointed as ambassador to Great Britain, where he believes the Second Coming of Christ will take place. He plans to do what he has to do to kill the child. Meanwhile, a group of priests has the Seven Knives of Megiddo from the first two films. After some Keystone Cops-style bumbling, they fail to kill Damien. Astronomers have now discovered three stars (three and seven have been mystic numbers from time immemorial) moving on a collision course, and the priests know that when they collide there will be a great flash, like the star of Bethlehem, that signaled Christ's birth. Damien plots to kill all male children born on the night of the stars' explosions (another allusion to Herod's Massacre of the Holy Innocents).

All of this is accompanied with a plethora of prayers to his father Satan by Damien in his private chapel, where Santanic sign and symbol abound, complete with a statue of the crucified Christ to revile; and most of his pronouncements echo the teachings of modern Satanism in terms of the fulfillment of desires. "Save the world," he prays, "from a second ordeal of Jesus Christ." Christ has "done nothing but drown man's soaring desires in a deluge of sanctimonious morality." When he addresses a large crowd of disciples, he rants, "Slay the Nazarene, and you will know the violent raptures of my father's kingdom. Fail and you will be condemned to an eternity in the flaccid bosom of Christ." His success, of course, would be accompanied by a New World Order.

In general, Damien's rise reflects the Evangelical Christian beliefs about the end times. Hal Lindsay surveyed world events in 1970 and laid out a scenario, basing his predictions on biblical passages, which looks quite like that from the *Omen* sequels and other films that use the New World Order as a source for vicarious fear: "The time is ripe and getting riper," Lindsey writes, "for the Great Dictator, the one

we call the 'Future Fuehrer.' This is the one who is predicted in the Scriptures very clearly and called the 'Antichrist.'"<sup>51</sup>

The title is finally fulfilled when Damien gets his just deserts. The film ends with quotations from Revelation: "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered (5:5)"; and "God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more (21:3-4)." The New Jerusalem would seem to have arrived and the New World Order staved off. We are finally safe from the Antichrist, the Other.

But not so, according to *Omen IV: The Awakening* (1991). Why let such a profitable franchise languish? And why not play on some more paranoia? A prosperous young couple, Gene and Karen York (Michael Woods and Faye Grant), adopt a child, Delia (Asia Vieira), from a Catholic orphanage. A young nun goes mad after the child leaves, suggesting she knows whereof she does not speak. Indeed, Delia seems demonic, scaring animals and causing pain for anyone who crosses her. Hints abound, including Delia's black aura pictures at a New Age psychic fair, more rottweilers, and other staples of Satanic sign and symbol.

In a rococo plot twist, we learn that Delia is actually the daughter of Damien Thorne and somehow carried the fetus of her twin brother in her body, which a doctor had transplanted into Karen York. The science is pretty hazy; but a conspiracy of Satanists plans to make Gene York president of the United States, found the much-feared New World Order, and elevate the twins as the new Antichrists. The ending positively begs for an *Omen V*, but the *Omen* plot seemed to have used up all of the cachet of its origins. Like old soldiers, however, good story lines never die in Hollywood, and in 2006, a remake of the original film was released that is nearly a shot-for-shot equivalent, apparently an exploitation of the year 2006, with a June 6th release, completing the *de rigueur* 666.

Fear of the New World Order as Satanic clearly has powerful appeal to a conservative Christian audience. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins picked up the Antichrist/New World Order plot line, added a good deal of evangelical Christian ideology and theology, and created a publishing sensation with the *Left Behind* novels. And if the books were best sellers, could movie versions be far behind? Thus, the first two books of the series were adapted to films as *Left Behind: the Movie* (2000) and *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (2002). They follow (rather haphazardly and often incorrectly according to many scholars) biblical descriptions of the end times, without the magical knives, black birds, evil dogs, and other occult apparatus of the *Omen* films. Most of the changes from biblical sources seem intended to

make the story more palatable. Revelation specifies 144,000 will be taken from the twelve tribes of Israel, but millions more disappear in novel and film, including children, and we get no mention of the twelve tribes. Evangelicals object to the Pope being one of those taken in the Rapture,<sup>52</sup> the moment when the righteous were taken, while Catholics are outraged that the Pope who replaces the one taken becomes the tool of the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia.

The *Left Behind* films follow the novels quite dutifully. They have little to do with sign and symbol from the Satanic tradition and much to do with biblical prophecy about the biblical end times, loosely presented, which, as it happens, can be easily adapted to paranoia about the Other represented by the New World Order. The films, and the novels that inspired them, tune into the same fears that Constance Cumby articulates: "It is the contention of this writer that for the first time since John penned these words [in Revelation] there is a viable movement—the New Age Movement—that truly meets the scriptural requirements for the antichrist and the political movement that will bring him to the world scene."<sup>53</sup>

Despite critical quibbles from many, the novels have been a money machine for the authors. If Cloud Ten Productions, the film's producers, are in sympathy with the righteous, however, they give them nothing free. The DVD for *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* has the usual FBI warning, but adds another screen: "Any showing in churches, halls, or auditoriums or other public venues are strictly prohibited . . . you may apply for a public exhibition of the movie at our Web site." There we find that showings for church groups or other public performances cost \$100 for the first film and \$250 for the second.

The popularity of the *Left Behind* books spawned imitation in films with the same theme, the return of the Antichrist as world leader. *The Omega Code* (1999), produced by Matthew Crouch, son of Paul Crouch who operates the Trinity Broadcasting Company, preceded the *Left Behind* films but might have been inspired by the success of the novels (the first LaHaye/Jenkins novel was published in 1995). The film's frame would be familiar to many occultists. We are told that the *Talmud*, the compendium of Jewish rabbinic wisdom writings and interpretations of the law, hides a code that contains messages (actually a well-worn concept among mystics). A Jewish scholar breaks the code with a computer. Every 25th or 50th letter in the text combine to make words with messages about the return of the messiah. Stone Alexander (Michael York) is possessed by Satan. He is also chairman of the European Union (a code word here for New World Order), and is desperate to get this message, and Gillen

Lane (Casper Van Dien), the film's doubter who has to be convinced, must stop him.

*Megiddo: The Omega Code II* (2002), also from Trinity Broadcasting, is a genuine curiosity. In effect, it is the same story as *The Omega Code*, told a little differently. The reference to Megiddo in the film's title alludes to the same biblical tradition from Revelation alluded to in the *Omen* films with the knives of Megiddo. The reference to Megiddo here signals to the faithful the site where the great battle preceding the apocalypse will be fought. In this one, Stone Alexander (again Michael York) is the son of a powerful media mogul. The film plays on the conviction of many that the media is a tool of the New World Order, still the Other endemic to the Satanic film.

*Lost Souls* (2000) seems a good choice for summing up the Antichrist story in film, as it combines several themes from the Satanic plot line: the birth of the Antichrist, exorcism, a vast underground Satanic cult network, all adding up to a healthy dose of horror produced by Satanic sign and symbol and fear of the Other. Maya Larkin (Winona Ryder), an elementary teacher in a Catholic school, has survived an exorcism earlier in her life, and she assists Father Lareaux (John Hurt) in attempting to exorcise demons from mass murderer Henry Birdson. The attempt fails, leaving Lareaux catatonic. In going through Birdson's papers, however, Maya finds pages of numbers from which she translates the name Peter Kelson (Ben Chaplin), a best-selling author, as the person who will become the Antichrist. The discovery of hidden messages in numbers resembles occultists' searches for meaning from the *Kabala*. Kelson is protected, without his knowledge, by a vast network of Satanists, the Others of the Satanic cult film.

Maya goes to see Kelson, and her words set the rest of the plot in motion: "[Townsend] believed that just as God became man in Christ, Satan will assume human form. I believe it too. . . . At the exorcism, Birdson boasted that Satan was about to take over the body of a man. You are that man, Peter." After initial disbelief (he has no religious faith, another doubter in the occult film plot), events force him to grudging acceptance.

Sign and symbol from the Satanic tradition abound in the film. When Peter tries to pray in a church, a statue of Christ falls in front of him, upside down, with Christ's eyes looking directly into Peter's. He and Maya visit a priest's apartment where they find papers to show that Peter's transformation will be on the moment of his 33rd birthday. In tradition, Christ was thirty-three at his death, and of course thirty-three is a multiple of three, a mystic number, a division of 666. They are attacked by the possessed Birdson, who has some-

how escaped. But Birdson cannot harm Peter, as both are Satanic. Peter then finds that his girlfriend, who turns out to be a member of the cult, had painted a reversed pentagram on the ceiling of the vacant apartment directly under his bed to protect him, a variation on the protective circle of the occult tradition.

In the final scenes, Peter and Maya go to see the uncle (a priest) who had raised him. But the priest turns out to be part of the Satanic cult that meets in his church, a favorite setting for sabbats in the Satanic tradition. The subversion of this most sacred place by Others should furnish an additional bit of vicarious paranoia and horror. Clearly, Maya has come to like and perhaps even care for Kelson. As the moment of his birthday approaches, Maya must decide whether she has the strength to pull the trigger, if and when he transforms, to prevent him from being, as she once told him, "the door to eternal suffering in this world."

Director Janusz Kaminski builds a convincing frame for the Anti-christ story, creating a dark and foreboding screen environment. The exorcism scenes are brief and, thankfully, lacking in green pea soup. Kaminski seems more interested in the situation of Peter Kelson's Oedipal journey of self-discovery and in the dramatic situation of his main characters. Paranoia reigns, as no one is to be trusted. The Others are everywhere.

"IN MY NAME WILL THEY CAST OUT DEMONS": THE POSSESSION  
AND EXORCISM THEMES: *THE EXORCIST*, SEQUELS, AND  
PREQUEL; *THE FIRST POWER*; *THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE*;  
AND *FALLEN*

William Friedkin's 1973 adaptation of Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist* surely ranks as one of the most effective horror films of all time. The film's power derives both from viewers' confrontation with Satanic evil (somehow a greater dread and a more powerful Other than that inspired by the slasher of the month) and the cinematic atmosphere the director establishes. It is the quintessential film about exorcism, and the screen ambience depends on biblical allusions as well as visual symbols and images of the demonic. The exorcism plot resembles the werewolf or vampire horror films a bit in that like those bitten, the individual possessed by demons loses self. Thus, the film's horror builds not only on screen ambience and the threat of the Other but on the additional threat of being consumed and becoming part of it.

Exorcism of demons goes far back in Christian tradition. The Bible



describes Christ and later his apostles forcing demons from the bodies of the afflicted in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles; and when the crucified Christ returns after his death to lecture the disciples, he says of believers, "In my name will they cast out demons" (Mark 16:17). The Catholic Church developed its own method called the Roman Ritual, which was often used in the past but has fallen into disfavor with the modern Church. Kurt Koch, a German with a degree in theology and mental health counseling, wrote popular studies of demonic possession that deeply influenced Christian fundamentalists in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Influenced by Koch, conservative Christianity, especially within the Pentacostal movement, has taken exorcism of demons much more seriously than the Catholic Church in recent days. The rites of exorcism fit the occult tradition not only in the presence of Satan but in the exorcist's supernatural power.

The splendid opening sequence of *The Exorcist* establishes the confrontation of good and evil that is to come. The setting is northern Iraq, a place of greater horror than we knew when the film appeared. Father Merrin, played by Max Von Sydow, is on an archeology dig but is recalled to the United States. Before he leaves, he finds an amulet showing Joseph holding the Christ Child, and he comments on how strange it is to find it in this location. Then Father Merrin finds a small carved head only a few feet away from the spot where the Joseph amulet had been found, demonic in appearance, and as he looks at it later in his office, a clock on the wall stops. He walks to another dig, deep in thought, as the Muslim call to worship fills the sound track. A circle of people hammer in unison in a smithy, one turns a clouded, blind eye to the camera, and a carriage occupied by a woman garbed in black nearly runs him down. The passage establishes the alien nature of the environment and leads to a culminating scene at a dig when Merrin confronts a statue of a winged, reptilian demon with the same head as the one he has found. Both the statue and the carved head are images of Pazuzu, a Mesopotamian demon from ancient times.<sup>55</sup>

Through sign and symbol, the opening establishes the theme of good versus evil and protection of the child. The shot of Merrin and Pazuzu, taken from the side with the two confronting each other, foreshadows the priest's role. Like Joseph on the amulet, he will be a protector, in this case of Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair). The horror ambience of the film then focuses on the antics in Regan's bedroom, with the psychokinetic goings-on, the demon's ranting, and the performance of the Roman Ritual of exorcism. One wonderful shot shows a shadow of Pazuzu emanating from the possessed Regan.

When Merrin's ailing heart fails him, Father Damien Karras (Jason

Miller), Merrin's assistant in the exorcism who, as the film's doubter, had undergone a crisis of belief before it began, must challenge the demon. He wins, but at the cost of his own life. Also, the Joseph and Child medal connects the start of the film with the final scene. Schrober proposes an alternate reading in which "Regan is not innocent at all," a possibility "borne out by her Shakespearian namesake." Basing such an argument on Freud's theory that possession is really an acting out of evil desires or wishes (articulated in "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis"), he suggests that the possessed child motif allows filmmakers "to explore in a less threatening or objectionable way highly taboo subjects" such as incest between child and parent.<sup>56</sup> But sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar. Regan is more than a demonically possessed child: she is an endangered one, a character deeply imbedded in popular culture from Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* and *Oliver Twist* to Danny in *The Shining*. The protection of the child in distress, as symbolized by the amulet, can be relied on to inspire audience empathy and response. After Father Karras's death, Chris MacNeil, Regan's mother, gives Karras's amulet to his friend before she drives away, and it too is a Joseph and Child figure. The amulet establishes both Karras and Merrin as protectors not only of a Regan possessed by a demon but in the more general sense of an endangered child.

The climactic scene following Father Merrin's death, with Father Karras pounding the possessed Regan, offers another interesting allusion to the biblical Satanic tradition. When Karras demands to know the demon's name, Regan, leering up at him, sneers, "We are legion!" The allusion is to Matthew 10. Christ exorcises demons from a possessed man. He demands, "What is your name," to which the demons reply, "We are Legion, for we are Many." They ask to be sent to a herd of swine (unclean animals for Jews), and Jesus accommodates them. Then the swine rush off a high cliff into the sea. When Karras demands of the demons that they take him, they possess his body, as the demons possessed the swine; and he jumps off the stairs of the apartment, as the swine had rushed off the cliff. In another passage, Christ says, "he who does not believe will be condemned" (Matthew 16:16). The film had earlier established Father Karras's crisis of faith, making him the doubter character, and perhaps the film shows us that he fails to measure up to Christ's prescription for casting out devils.

Stephen King notes that the source of *The Exorcist's* phenomenal popularity as both film and novel was that it cut across demographic boundaries, appealing both to the teen horror crowd and to adults. The student revolution had just passed and young people were still in rebellion against the establishment. Hence, he suggests, "It was a

movie for all those parents who felt, in a kind of agony and terror, that they were losing their children and could not understand why or how it was happening." It is a "Jekyll-and-Hyde tale in which sweet, lovely and loving Regan turns into a foul-talking monster."<sup>57</sup> Whatever the reason for the film's success, the plot is such a good one that it inspired imitations, sequels, a prequel, and a satirical send-up.

The most obvious imitation is the Showtime production *Possessed* (2000). Blatty's novel was loosely based on an actual exorcism he had heard about, and the producers of *Possessed* claim the film is closer to the "real" story. Robbie Mannheim (Jonathan Malen), an adolescent boy who played at the occult with his aunt, including ouija boards, is the possessed child. When objects start flying about in his room and in his school, his parents eventually take him to Father William Bowden (Timothy Dalton), a Jesuit faculty member at St. Louis University who, like Father Karras in *The Exorcist*, carries a load of guilt and is the film's doubter but comes to believe the boy is really possessed. The film has the same supernatural fireworks from Robby that Regan provides in *The Exorcist*, with Bowden eventually discovering the demon's true name for an exorcism.

But do *Possessed* and *The Exorcist* bear any relationship to reality? Indeed, in 1949, a fourteen-year-old boy from a broken home in Maryland had all the symptoms portrayed in *Possessed*. As in the film, a Lutheran minister did fail to cure him, and Fathers William Bowden, Albert Hughes, and Raymond Bishop did conduct exorcisms in St. Louis. Father Bishop kept a diary of events, and Father Walter Halloran, who helped the real Father Bowden, wrote an extensive notebook, which he gave to Thomas Allen. Allen got more information from Father Halloran and published the notebook and other findings as *Possessed*. Halloran also told another young student of the incident, William Peter Blatty, who adapted what he'd heard into a more spellbinding yarn, *The Exorcist*, leading us back to William Friedken's fine film and its less successful sequels.

The first, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977), was panned by critics for its muddled plot and bad acting. Script writer William Goodhart and director John Boorman tried to make the film a meditation on human nature and the reality of evil, but the result is confused and too philosophical for the metroplex horror audience. The film remains focused on the issue of demonic possession. But how do demons choose victims? And why? These are the issues that the film tries, however unsuccessfully, to focus on.

*Exorcist II* opens with Father Philip Lamont (Richard Burton) being given a charge to investigate the death of Father Merrin, the priest who dies while trying to exorcise the demon in the original

film. Lamont accepts the responsibility reluctantly because a young woman on whom he had conducted an exorcism had died, and he now wants nothing more to do with cases of possession. However, he visits Regan MacNeil (still played by Linda Blair). She lives with a governess while her mother is away on a movie shoot. Lamont immediately clashes with Gene Tuskin (Louise Fletcher), Regan's counselor. Lamont insists "Evil is a spiritual being, alive and living, perverted and perverting, weaving itself insidiously into the very fabric of life." But Tuskin, the doubter for the film, insists on scientific answers.

The film drifts into silliness when Tuskin treats Regan with a hypnotic mind-meld machine, a technological version of Mr. Spock's technique in *Star Trek*. Tuskin, linked with Regan, nearly dies when she sees the scene in the child's bedroom four years previously, as Pazuzu attempts to induce the heart attack that had killed Father Merrin. When Father Lamont dons the gear, he sees Merrin's death and forms a psychic bond with Regan.

The plot plods along, with Lamont discovering the existence of a boy, Kokumo, in Africa, whom Merrin had saved in an exorcism years before and who had extraordinary powers over the locust swarms that plague Africa. The locusts are the primary symbol of evil in the film, probably a reference to Revelation 9:1-6, which describes an angel opening the bottomless pit and locusts rising, charged with tormenting those not identified as saved during the end times.

The film has established Regan's extraordinary powers (she cures an autistic child) and her goodness. And therein lies the theme in this fatally flawed but philosophically and theologically ambitious film. When Lamont has entered Regan's mind, he is in touch with Father Merrin's life and work (don't ask how). Merrin had speculated, "does great goodness draw evil upon itself?" So it would seem. Those shown as possessed in the film have this "great goodness" of heart. And Lamont, talking to the grown-up Kokumo, now a scientist dedicated to battling locust plagues, learns that Kokumo is developing a "good female locust" who would quiet the others and keep them from swarming.

The end of *Exorcist II* is even more muddled than the rest of it, with a confrontation between Lamont and Pazuzu back in Regan's Georgetown bedroom in a hopelessly confused conclusion. Just what happens to Lamont is never made clear, but in the confrontation of good and evil, the "good locust," Regan, seems to win out over the demon. The film's message is that there is evil in most people, perhaps the evil of original sin from a theological perspective; and that evil, like the locusts, can swarm and do great damage. But with the influ-

ence of a few good souls, such as Regan and Kokumo, who are special targets of demonic forces, evil can be overcome. Dramatically flawed as it may be, *Exorcist II* remains a thought-provoking film.

William Peter Blatty wrote and directed *Exorcist III* (1990), which is based on his novel *Legion*, and it is far more effective as a horror film than the first sequel, because of both Blatty's dark and threatening screen ambience and the threat of the hidden Other. In the film, police lieutenant Kinderman from the original *Exorcist* investigates serial killings. Kinderman (an aging and corpulent George C. Scott playing the Lee J. Cobb role) finds in the killings parallels with the methods of the Gemini Killer, executed years earlier. In his investigation, he discovers a man who had been catatonic for years but recently awakened, and this man is possessed. And thus begins the Lieutenant's struggle with ultimate evil.

Kinderman begins a long contest with the revived catatonic man. The detective has lost his religious faith due to excessive exposure to the heart of darkness. He blames God for the pain of the world and for the death of his best friend Father Karras, who had died exorcising the demons from the body of Regan MacNeil: hence, he is the film's scoffer who has to be convinced. So when this man tells Kinderman he is the Gemini Killer, the detective does not believe him. He knows that Gemini was executed. But the man tells him, "I was obliged to kill to settle a score on behalf of—well, a friend . . . , a friend over there. On the Other Side, one needs friends. There is suffering over there. They can be cruel." As the face of the man fades in and out, he sometimes looks like Father Karras.

Indeed, in a lengthy soliloquy from Gemini toward the end of the film, the killer tells Kinderman that his "master," presumably a demon, had placed him in Karras's body just as the priest's soul was about to depart it. Therefore, Karras's soul is trapped in this body along with the demon and the Gemini Killer. The murderer tells Kinderman that he died, then was recruited, so to speak, and sent back to life to do the demon's dirty work because, as Gemini tells Kinderman, a spirit needs a body to work in. "Along came . . . well, you know, my friend, one of them, those others, the cruel ones, the Master. And he thought that my work should continue, but not in *this* body . . . let's call it revenge, a certain matter of an exorcism, I think, in which your friend father Karras expelled certain parties from a child . . . and so my friend, the Master devised this pretty little scheme as a stumbling block . . . using the body of this saintly priest . . . he is inside with us. He will never get away. His pain will never end."

*Exorcist III* is an effective horror film, well directed with an excel-

lent script. Blatty eschews splatter film techniques for suggestion, especially the horror of Karras' situation trapped inside the body with a murderer and a demon. We never see Gemini actually doing the horrible things he does to his victims. Even when Kinderman has his final confrontation with the demon in an exorcism scene, the film never becomes as explicit as most horror films, including the first *Exorcist*. Also, though *Exorcist III* falls within the tradition of the occult, it achieves its effects without the Satanic sign and symbol so much a part of most Satanic films. Rather, Blatty focuses on the ultimate Otherness of the demon.

But two sequels and an imitation weren't enough. In 2004, Renny Harlin directed *Exorcist: The Beginning*. Blatty had opened the door for a prequel in *The Exorcist*. Father Merrin, we are told, had done exorcisms before. *The Beginning* develops Merrin's character, showing him as a priest who had lost his faith (and is therefore the doubter of the occult film plot) and left the priesthood after being forced to participate in a Nazi atrocity during World War II. The film opens in 1949 in the Middle East. Merrin (Stellan Skarsgård), an archeologist, is hired to go to a dig at a church to steal an artifact that was discovered in a place where there should have been no church at the time it was built.

The plot frame tells of an ancient evil that possesses people in serial fashion, continuing the horror element of loss of self in the possession theme and adding the potential for on-screen violence. *Exorcist: The Beginning* relies more heavily on traditional Satanic symbols than the other *Exorcist* films—blackbirds, upside-down crosses, and desecration of holy objects—and less on the dark, brooding ambience of Friedkin's original film in the series. It also lacks *The Exorcist*'s suspense, and plot elements meet dead ends. We never learn who hired Merrin or why they wanted the artifact (which turns out to be a statuette of Pazuzu, connecting with the first *Exorcist* film). Director Harlin establishes a red herring, leading us to assume that a Black child is possessed, then reversing field. The conclusion leaves us open for a sequel to the prequel, with the statuette of Pazuzu disappearing—perhaps to reappear soon at the local metroplex.

In *Exorcist III*, the Satanically possessed Gemini Killer can reach out and force people to do his will, giving them extraordinary strength. So it goes in *The First Power* and *Fallen*, less skillfully written and produced films. Both *Exorcist III* and *First Power* were released in 1990, and perhaps both were influenced by serial killer Gary Gilmore's announced belief in a reincarnation that would bring him back to kill again.

*The First Power* (1990) and *Fallen* (1998) offer variation on the ex-

orcism theme: a demon engages in serial possession. Both also make a silent commentary on another kind of horror: the dangers we face in contemporary society that have nothing to do with the supernatural. In *The First Power*, Detective Russ Logan (Lou Diamond Phillips) manages to capture Satanic serial killer Patrick Channing (Jeff Kober). But after Channing's execution, more killings with his modus operandi turn up (an inverted pentagram carved on the victim). Psychic Tess Seaton (Tracy Griffith) had been in touch with the mind of the killer and had sent Logan leads that led to his capture. She had insisted that he promise not to allow the killer to be executed because she knows that Channing would return. So he does when Logan fails in his promise, possessing the bodies of addicts, alcoholics, the mentally challenged, and others who are unable to resist him and using them for his murders.

The film turns into a series of fight, flight, and pursuit scenes. Toward the end, however, Sister Marguerite, who at the start of the film tries to get her cardinal to take a stand on the Satanic nature of the killer who is ravaging the city (he declines, telling her "we might all end up on Geraldo"), tells Tess and Logan the source of Channing's power in the lecture that establishes the frame: "There are three powers that can be bestowed by God or Satan. The third power is the ability to take over another person's body. Your friend is a psychic. She has the second power, the gift of knowing the future. The first power is resurrection—immortality." How will our hero and heroine destroy the demon? "There's just one way," the Sister tells them, "through the only soul in history that had all three powers." And she gives them a Christian relic as a weapon, one similar to the knives of Megiddo in *Omen*.

The three powers are a fabrication from the script writer. But the Gnostic Apocrypha make frequent references to "powers" that writers might adapt. In "The Gospel of Mary," for instance, Mary Magdalene lectures the apostles on her conversation with the resurrected Christ. Much of the manuscript has been lost, but in one part she refers to "powers," specifically the third and fourth powers (the others are missing). The third power is ignorance, or the body, which conducts a dialogue with the soul. The soul must break free of this power to reach gnosis (knowledge of God) and eternal rest. Mary's words reflect basic Gnostic beliefs. *The Apocryphon of John* and other Gnostic texts also refer to "powers."

*The First Power* mixes in a bit of Satanic sign and symbol. Inverted pentagrams abound, and as he is about to ceremonially sacrifice a policewoman he has captured, Channing begins intoning a scrambled version of the Lord's Prayer ("Heaven in art which father are"), part

of the desecration of holy things credited to the Satanic Mass and an indication of the Otherness of Satanic evil. A problem in *The First Power* is that it does not stay entirely true to its frame, which posits that, as Tess says, "A spirit can't really do anything in the physical world without a body, and Channing possesses bodies." The need for a spirit to inhabit a body in order to affect the material world is a given in occult lore. Repeatedly, however, we see Channing's physical form, rather than the body he is supposed to have possessed, fighting with Logan.

The serial possession theme is even more central in *Fallen* (1998), a film that offers a different spin on possession and paranoia. *Fallen* establishes detective John Hobbes (Denzil Washington) as a squeaky clean, righteous man, perhaps a sort of Job figure. He has a reputation for never accepting bribes, and he supports his mildly retarded brother and his nephew. When he visits Reese (a convicted serial killer whom he had captured) on death row the killer speaks in a strange language (later identified as Syrian Aramaic) and reaches out to touch Hobbes.

After Reese's execution, the city experiences a spate of murders similar to those perpetrated by the dead killer. Someone seems to be trying to frame Hobbes for the killings and ruin his life. Gradually, with the help of Greta Milano (Embeth Davidtz), a professor of religion and the daughter of a detective who had committed suicide, Hobbes comes to believe that a demon named Azazel, or Azazel as the name is sometimes spelled, one of the angels named in The Book of Enoch who were cast into *Sheol* for taking human wives, has framed him. The scriptwriter chose his fallen angel wisely, as it was Azazel who first gave humans weaponry according to The Book of Enoch and who is regarded as a demon of the wild in Jewish myth, one who also taught humans sorcery.<sup>58</sup> Unlike the possessions in *The Exorcist* and other demonic possession films, Channing in *The First Power* and Azazel in *Fallen* can move from body to body by touch, leaving each body instantly without its remembering what it has done.

Greta tells Hobbes of a shadowy network whose charge is to fight demons. She lectures him, in the process explaining the frame to the audience: "There are certain phenomena which can only be explained if there's a God and if there are angels—and there are; they exist. Some of these angels were cast down and a few of the Fallen were punished by being deprived of form. They can only survive in the bodies of others. It's inside of us, inside of human beings, their vengeance is played out." Apparently, Hobbes is immune to possession because his life has been filled with moral choices: the demon had



tried to enter him by touch in the prison scene, but fails. Azazel wants to destroy Hobbes because, as the detective learns later from a fictional biblical text that echoes *Exorcist II*'s thesis about demons preying on the good, "They [demons] stalk those who prey upon them. Therefore hide your good works." So Azazel wreaks vengeance on Hobbes by working through those bodies that he can possess.

Like *The First Power*, *Fallen* is interesting for its approach to the paranoia theme endemic to the Satanic film and the horror generated by the Other. The film lays it on thick, but both have an important subtext as parables on urban life. Logan and Hobbes run through the city, chasing or being chased by a demon; but which body does it inhabit in the crowded mean streets? Whom can one trust? Violence rules the streets, but in real life it does not come from demons but the flesh-and-blood kind of killers whom we may not recognize as threats. Serial killers might lurk behind the most innocent exterior, and possession by touch suggests the fear of infection from AIDS and other diseases.

*The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005) is an interesting combination of horror film and courtroom drama. When Emily (Jennifer Carpenter), a university student who comes from a rural area, begins seeing demons and going into convulsions, doctors diagnose epilepsy and dose her on Gabutrol. But she gets worse. Her boyfriend brings her home, and the parish priest, Father Moore (Tom Wilkinson), believes she is possessed. He begins an exorcism, during which Emily dies. The local district attorney charges Father Moore with negligent homicide because he had recommended she stop taking the drug. Attorney Erin Bruner (Laura Linney) agrees to defend the priest, even though she is agnostic, when she is promised full partnership in her firm. She is the doubter character from the occult film conventions, with a unique twist at the end of the film.

All the possession incidents appear in flashbacks during the trial. They include a good deal of the usual for exorcism films: Emily's bodily contortions; speaking in tongues; and demons (six of them), Others who possess her and speak through her. Also, things begin happening to the unbelieving Erin that shake her unbelief. Spooky incidents occur in her home. Her watch and clock stop at 3:00 a.m., the traditional witching hour because it reverses the time Christ is said to have died, 3:00 p.m. Father Moore tells her, "There are forces surrounding this trial, dark powerful forces. . . . Demons exist, whether you believe in them or not." Her participation, he insists, may open her up to attack.

Unlike most doubters in the occult film, Erin, our center of vision, is never quite convinced, though her unbelief is shaken and the events

change her and develop her character. Despite personal doubts about demonic possession, she decides her only way to succeed is to defend the concept, even knowing that her firm, paid by the diocese which wants things covered up, will fire her if she does. She makes a convincing case. But for every argument she puts up for the jury (and for the viewer) that possession is a genuine phenomenon, the prosecutor puts up convincing counterarguments, creating a multiple-choice ending. The film gives more evidence that Emily Rose was indeed possessed than that she was mentally ill and epileptic. But whether the viewer shares Erin's doubt or accepts Emily's possession, the film wallows in paranoia, with Erin seeming to be stalked by the demonic and invisible Other.

The skeptical Erin is not convinced at the end, and when Father Moore asks her if she now believes, she responds, perhaps articulating some viewers' experience in watching the film, "I just don't know." The film is loosely based on a real incident in Germany in 1976, described in Felicitas D. Goodman's book *The Exorcism of Anneliese Michel*. Two priests who conducted the exorcism and Anneliese's parents were convicted of negligent homicide. Like the film, Goodman's book privileges belief in demonic possession.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL: THE FAUST STORY IN FILM: *SORROWS OF SATAN, FAUST, DR. FAUSTUS, THE DEVIL AND DANIEL WEBSTER, MEPHISTO WALTZ, AND ANGEL HEART*

As is often the case with legends, the Faust story has a historical personage at its base, a 16th-century man whom Melton calls "a wandering magician or necromancer whose picturesque character won him notoriety."<sup>59</sup> According to some contemporary sources, Satan took Faust away to Hell in a noisy confrontation. Such a sensational legend must soon make its way into literature. The first known version is a German story (1587) that in its English translation is titled *The Most Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*. This tale was the source for the most famous adaptation of the story in English literature, Christopher Marlowe's 1604 *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Another adaptation with quite a different spin came two hundred years later with Johann Von Goethe's *Faust, ein Tragödie* (1808). Both Marlowe's and Goethe's versions have seen film adaptations. Three themes run through the Faust legend and its adaptation in film. The first is the sin of pride, a character's bargaining for knowledge and power that humanity is not intended to have. The second is the issue of free will, in which the Faust character reflects John

Milton's dictum in *Paradise Lost* that humanity is created sufficient to withstand temptation but free to fall. And finally, the character's sexual desire often leads to the choice for evil.

Both Marlowe's and Goethe's Faust stories have made their way to film, and each is a prototype of the Faust themes. The great German director F. W. Murnau directed Goethe's story (*Faust, Eine Deutsche Volkssaga*—1926), using only the first part of the long work. The film begins with a Job-like introduction. In the Old Testament story, God speaks to Satan, saying, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man that feareth God and escheweth evil?" Sly Satan sets the story in motion by answering, "Doth Job fear God for naught?" (1:8–9), suggesting that Job simply hasn't been tempted.

So it goes in Goethe's, and Murnau's version, with a similar scene in Heaven. God tells Mephistopheles, "All things in Heaven and earth are wonderful. But the greatest wonder is man's freedom to choose between good and evil." When Mephistopheles disputes the claim, God points to Faust as an example of a virtuous man, which results in a wager. God tells Mephistopheles, "If thou canst destroy what is divine in Faust, the Earth is thine." Thus, the film establishes the first theme of the Faust story, free will.

Goethe's and Murnau's Faust is a virtuous man and, because he wants to help others, he accepts a temporary pact with Mephistopheles for one day, with no obligations. His pride of intellect makes him sure that he can, and must, heal the sick. Lust, the second Faust theme, enters the story when Mephistopheles offers him both his youth and a beautiful woman. Then the central plot of the film begins when Faust seduces the virtuous Gretchen, causing her death. Faust's repentance allows God to win His bet because, He tells Satan, one word breaks their pact, "love." The film version includes only part 1 of Goethe's work.

The second great literary Faust story, Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, was filmed in 1968, with Richard Burton playing the role. The film condenses Marlowe's play a bit but is quite true to its source. Marlowe's Faust's pride brings his downfall, when he rejects logic, medicine, and theology for occult power because, as Marlowe tells his audience in the Prologue, "Nothing so sweet as magic is to him, / Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss." He succeeds in conjuring up Mephistopheles, and he gets ample warning. When Faust asks where Hell is located, Mephistopheles tells him in some of Marlowe's great poetry, "Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it. Think thou that I, who saw the face of God and tasted the joys of eternal Heaven, am not tormented with 10,000 Hells in being deprived of everlasting bliss? Oh Faustus,

leave these frivolous demands which strike a terror to my fainting soul." But Faust replies, again revealing the depth of his pride, "learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude and scorn those joys thou never shalt possess."

True to the tradition, Faust then exercises his free will to sign his pact for seven years of service from Mephistopheles but does little with it other than performing tricks for the rich and famous that are a sort of reflection of the slapstick antics of his servants. He repeatedly ignores pleas from his "good angel" to repent, but Mephistopheles keeps Faust in his fold by offering him Helen of Troy (Elizabeth Taylor in multiple roles). The sight of her evokes the well-known lines from Faust, "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships / and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" He chooses to refuse the good angel's advice and comes to his most lamentable end when he is taken to Hell: "I'll burn my books! Let Faustus live in Hell 1,000 years, 100,000 years, and at last be saved! No end is limited to damned souls."

In many ways, Faust represents the ideals of the Renaissance. Spivack argues that Marlowe's Faust represents two sides of the Renaissance intellectual dilemma. Faust is not only a magician but "a vital symbol of the Renaissance spirit of free thought and inquiry as opposed to dogmatism." But he is also "an embodiment of individualistic striving for ego gratification," an overachiever. Mephistopheles, in this view of things, is a dark side of Faust's character, one who is quite willing to damn the scholar's soul but also grimly aware that he has damned himself for similar reasons.<sup>60</sup> But the moral center of the film and play are Faust's choices: his failure to control pride, his giving in to lust, and his desire for power not intended for humans.

D. W. Griffith's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926) was adapted from Maria Corelli's novel published in 1896. Griffith's film is apparently the second adaptation, but a 1917 version is no longer available. Interestingly enough, Griffith's film was released in the same year as Murnau's *Faust*. The "let's make a deal" with the Devil story apparently had appeal for Griffith, as he had been dissuaded from producing a Faust film a few years earlier.<sup>61</sup> Geoffrey Tempest (played by Ricardo Cortez), the hero of *Sorrows of Satan* and a failed writer, doesn't sign a contract in blood; but after he meets and seduces Mavis Claire (Carol Dempster), another struggling writer, and cannot raise the cash to buy a wedding license, he cries, "I'd sell my soul for money if there were a Devil to buy it." Right away, dapper Prince Lucio de Rimanez (Adolph Menjou) shows up to tell him he has inherited a fortune.

Rimanez is a different sort of Satan. Opening titles detail his expul-

sion from Heaven. An introductory title explains, "Because God created man in His divine image, Lucifer—the mightiest of the Archangels—rose in rebellion and with his bright host was hurled from the gates of Heaven." We then see Satan and his minions cast out, with God's angels in pursuit. Then the archangels slowly fade into devils and another title establishes the frame: "Satan shall be thy name—and forever thou shalt tempt the sons of men to sin against the God who made you both. . . . Only when all men turn from thee, canst thou resume thy glorious place at God's right hand—yet for every soul that resists thee, thou shalt have one hour at the gates of Paradise!" Satan used his free will to rebel, so now he must prey upon erring humans to follow his lead. He is an efficient tempter but is sorrowful when his prey takes the bait, for he loses his hour at the gates of the celestial city.

Riches lure Geoffrey, another form of the desire for power, and he falls for Satan's line enough to drop poor Mavis for wealth and marry Olga Godovsky, a slinky Russian princess, the parallel theme of lust from the Faustian story. Thus, the film follows the usual plot line with Geoffrey using his free will to make wrong choices. Ramirez meanwhile tries to tempt Mavis with literary success, appealing to her pride when he meets her at a party; but she rejects him, prompting him to say, "Mavis Claire, though I cannot help you, *you have helped me,*" as she has advanced his return to Paradise.

Predictably, Tempest's wealth does not make him happy, and his princess tries to cheat on him with Ramirez, both of whom are the conventional jaded and decadent European characters endemic to earlier American literature and film. Then Geoffrey, miserable in his new life, questions God's goodness, another sin of pride as he places himself on a level above mere humanity to judge God. Ramirez reveals himself as Satan, casting a bat-winged shadow against the wall. Terrified, Geoffrey runs to Mavis's room and begs her help: "Yours is the way, Mavis. Help me, help me to God." Mavis simply recites the Lord's Prayer, and the shadow retires, leaving us to assume Geoffrey is saved.

The conclusion seems rather unsatisfactory as a version of the Faust story, perhaps because it adapts the character types from sentimental fiction and drama of Corelli's time. Kristen Guest notes that reworkings of the Faust story in fiction and drama were popular in the late nineteenth century and that they glamorized, as do the original Faust narratives, male initiative and intellectual striving. Corelli, Guest writes, "offers an alternative to ambition in the conscious self-sacrifice of her female protagonists"<sup>62</sup> in *Sorrows of Satan* and her other works. Griffith certainly follows this aspect of the novel, but Mavis as

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**Prince Rimanez (Adolph Menjou) reveals himself as Satan to Geoffrey Tempest (Ricardo Cortez) in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926). Image courtesy of Photofest, Inc.**

she appears in the film is a quite conventional Victorian “good woman,” a variation on Coventry Patmore’s “angel in the house,” juxtaposed against Olga Godovsky’s “fallen woman” who tempts men to their doom. Something is lost from the hard edge of the Faust legend.

A more uplifting version of the Faust theme comes from Stephen Vincent Benét’s short story “The Devil and Daniel Webster,” which was made into the film *All That Money Can Buy* (1941), alternately titled *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. The film establishes the themes of pride, free will, and lust, but it turns them into a populist moral fable that reflects the issues of its time. Set in pre-Civil War days, the film shows New Hampshire farmer Jabez Stone (James Craig) having a run of truly hard luck that leads him to cry, “That’s enough to make a man sell his soul to the Devil. And I would for about two cents.” And up pops Old Scratch, played in a wonderful performance by Walter Huston.

The Devil is persuasive and, as always, a liar, telling Jabez that his soul is really nothing. After some shilly-shallying, Jabez exercises his free will to sign for seven years of good fortune. Jabez immediately

prosper, but his mother, played by Jane Darwell in a reprise of her Ma Joad character from *Grapes of Wrath*, always has wise words. She tells Jared, "When a man gets his money in bad ways, when he sees the better course and takes the worse, then the Devil's in his heart, and that fixes him." "And yet a man could change all that," broods Jared. "A man can always change things. That's what makes him different from the barnyard critters," she replies, reiterating the free will theme. Darwell has the same function as the Good Angel in Marlowe's *Faust*, reminding the hero, and the viewer, of the potential for repentance. But this film is no tragedy, and the lines sum up its theme. Humans have free will and the opportunity for repentance. Scratch's evil influence changes Jared, however, who becomes more and more greedy.

Then Belle (the glamorous Simone Simon) arrives, sent by Scratch, to be a housemaid and to tempt Jared, providing the sin of lust for the Faustian theme. He seems easy to tempt, as Belle quickly takes over the house from his wife Mary, and spoils Jared's young son. Our hero has succumbed to the Faustian sins of pride and lust, with Jared losing human feelings for his neighbors; true to the cliché, in this version of the Faust legend, his pride went before his fall.

Daniel Webster (Edward Arnold) weaves in and out of the story. Jared had always admired the great senator, and when Jared's time is near and he is despondent and angry, Mary goes to Webster, who seems to know what the problem is. In a wonderful closing scene, Webster rushes to the Stone farm. Jabez tells him that his time is up, and Webster cries, "No it isn't. I'd fight 10,000 devils to save a New Hampshireman." Webster challenges Scratch, telling him that if he can't get a jury to spare Stone then Scratch can have his own soul. Scratch eagerly agrees, but the jury he calls is composed of the damned souls of American villains such as Benedict Arnold and others. Things look dark, but Webster's impassioned closing argument waves the flag of patriotism and saves the day.

The subject of the film was a ripe one for the 1940s. While the Great Depression was abating, times were hard. Many Americans were oppressed by moneylenders like Miser Stevens and the fallen Jabez. Although the United States was not yet at war when the film was released in 1941, it was plain to most that our involvement was inevitable. Thus, the patriotic oratory with which Webster wrings the hearts of the jury, if they had had hearts, reflects issues of the times. Also, Scratch and Webster represent the best and worst of the American character. The Devil symbolizes rampant individualism. "When the first wrong was done to the first Indian, I was there," he tells the jury. And after his pact with Satan, Jabez rejects the spirit of coopera-

tion by refusing to join the Grange (which perhaps should be read as "union"). Webster, on the other hand, risks all, including his soul, to save a fellow New Hampshireman.

*Mephisto Waltz* (1971), based on Fred Mustard Stewart's novel, spins the Faust story with special emphasis on the Faustian theme of lust. When Myles Clarkson (Alan Alda), a "music journalist," meets the great pianist and composer Duncan Ely (Curt Jürgens), the aging Ely is instantly fascinated with the younger man's training as a pianist and his hands, which are the same size as his own. Gradually he admits Myles and his wife, Paula (Jacqueline Bisset), into his rather bizarre circle, which includes his beautiful daughter Roxanne (Barbara Parkins). While Myles becomes ever more drawn to Duncan and Roxanne, Paula is deeply suspicious, suspecting that the father and daughter are having an incestuous relationship. Duncan Ely dies in what seems to be a scheduled fashion. In his will he leaves money and his piano to Myles, who has become his protégé.

In dreams, Paula sees her daughter Abby marked on the forehead by Roxanna. Following the dream, Abby sickens and dies of unexplained causes. Paula is also convinced that Roxanne and Duncan were part of a Satanic group (yet another filmic cult) and that Abby's death is somehow related to Myles' sudden transformation into a virtuoso pianist. Paula makes her own deal with the Devil to get her man back.

The theme of sexual obsession dominates, connected of course to free will; and sign and symbol reinforce the connection with Satanism. A New Year's party at Duncan's home turns into something like the traditional Black Mass orgy. Duncan's work room has a stuffed bat next to *The Book of Calls*,<sup>63</sup> apparently a spell book for summoning Satan. At Duncan's death, Roxanne draws the traditional occult circle with a pentagram and a black candle in the middle from which she casts her spell. Duncan has a ferocious black dog reminiscent of the "hounds of Hell" from *The Omen*, and Paula finds a news article that reveals that Duncan's wife had been killed by such a dog in Switzerland. Then at the end, when Paula makes her bargain, she casts her own circle, reads from the *Book of Calles*, and when Satan arrives, revealed only by a shot of feet walking in the door, she says, "Master. I'm ready to bargain."

The major players are Faust figures. In Paula's dream, Duncan tells her that he doesn't really want to kill this beautiful child; but, "He [presumably Satan] wants it done right now . . . it's part of the deal." He alludes, no doubt, to the traditional Satanic sacrifice of a child. In return, Duncan gets another life by taking over Myles's body as well as enjoying continued sexual pleasure with his daughter. Bill De



Lancey, Roxanne's ex-husband, tells Paula, "They play at witchcraft so they can do absolutely anything they like," echoing LaVey's 8th Satanic Statement: "Satan represents all the so-called sins, as they all lead to physical, mental, or emotional gratification."<sup>64</sup> As in the Satanic tradition, deals with the Devil bring sexual potency. After Myles has been taken over, he and Paula go for a vacation, and when they return, Paula tells her friend Maggie, "I feel unfaithful. He's like three different men." Later, Bill De Lancey tells Paula, "They say the truth is that once you've had one of them, nothing else will quite satisfy you." And it is her lust for Myles that drives Paula to make her deal. When Maggie tells her she should divorce her husband for his infidelity with Roxanne, Paula responds, "I want Myles. Whoever he is. I still want him, even, if it's just once more."

Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), adapted from William Hjortsberg's novel *Fallen Angel*, is the most interesting cinematic version of the Faust story and a true horror film, with its effect deriving from signs and symbols from the Satanic occult. While few viewers would know the meaning of these symbols, Parker employs them to establish a truly threatening screen ambience and create a neglected classic of the horror genre. Once again, the film plays on paranoia, suggesting that Satanic Others live among us.

The opening shots establish this ambience in the streets of 1950s' New York. In a night setting, the viewer sees steam rolling up from manholes, a cat (the witch's familiar) runs past and a nattily dressed man walks down the street. The camera then shifts to a body lying in a pile of garbage, as voices that sound like damned souls bombard viewers' ears. This opening sets the tone. Private detective Harry Angel (played by Mickey Rourke) takes an assignment from Louis Cyphre (Robert de Niro) to find Johnny Favorite, a former crooner who, says Cyphre, owes him something. As the film develops, we learn that Favorite, an adept in the left-hand path and a Faust figure, had sold his soul to Cyphre and to avoid payment had combined his soul with that of a returning service man, Harry Angel, without the victim consciously knowing that Favorite is a part of his being (another version of the possession theme). Singer notes that the film establishes a rather unique Doppelgänger motif: "Harry's murderous and repressed 'Other' is Johnny Favorite . . . the irony is that Harry does not know that his Doppelgänger exists; the plot builds to this self-discovery."<sup>65</sup> But Harry is also an Oedipus figure. The film culminates with his gruesome murder of a young girl, Epiphany, a crime that will bring about the shock of recognition, his execution, and his journey to Hell. Like Oedipus, Harry Angel finds his true identity.

The viewer should be in little doubt that Cyphre is Lucifer because

of his name (Lu-Cyphre) and because of the Satanic inverted pentangle in a ring that the actor prominently displays. Events suggest that he is the man walking away from the corpse we see in the opening footage. The hexagram, the six-pointed star, is another such symbol. The inverted pentangle appears repeatedly throughout the film. At one point, Harry meets Toots Sweet, a black musician, at a Voodoo ceremony in New Orleans, tracks him to his home, and the two fight. In close-ups, viewers see a gold upside-down pentangle on a front tooth in Toots Sweet's mouth. Also, Margaret Krusemark, Favorite's former lover, wears a necklace with the inverted pentangle.

The film's repeated shots of ceiling fans offer yet another version of pentangles and hexagrams. During the fight with Toots Sweet, Parker cuts to an overhead fan with six blades. When the fight ends and Harry Angel walks away, the shot shows Angel descending one of the many serpentine staircases in the film, suggestive of the descent into Hell. Then the camera returns to Sweet's room, focusing on the ceiling fan. It rotates slowly and stops, symbolizing Sweet's death. But it stops with two of the blades up, making the sign of Satan. Other fan images abound. In the bedroom of Dr. Fowler, whom Harry goes to see in Poughkeepsie, we see a four-bladed fan on which the camera focuses. The movement of the fan, camera angle, and lighting cast shadows of the fan arms with what look like tips forming the ancient occult symbol of the swastika. A similar image appears from a fan in a bar where Harry Angel goes after his visit with Krusemark.<sup>66</sup> Yet another image of the pentangle appears in the final scene when Cyphre has collected his debt and Harry Angel will be bound for Hell. He descends in an elevator. The camera zooms in on the spokes of the wheels that turn the cables, and they make a perfect five-pointed star.

Satanic imagery permeates the film. When Harry breaks into a Black evangelist's room at the start of the film, he opens a drawer to find a pair of eyeballs and the preserved head of a monkey, objects suggestive of voodoo ceremony, which many viewers would associate (incorrectly) with Satanism. Other objects in the desk include a cross shown as inverted and a pendant in the form of a heart, symbolizing the heart ripped from victims in Satanic ceremony as well as the Satanic heart in Harry Angel. In other shots, we see figures of nuns in full habits, reminding us of the costumes worn at the sabbat. And in a few flash cuts, we see naked bodies writhing in the *de rigueur* orgy that is included in legends of the Black Mass, presumably a memory from the Johnny Favorite side of Harry Angel's personality.

The final shots of the film culminate the sign and symbol that create the ambience of this powerful film and combine the Faust and Anti-christ plots. At the outset, Cyphre is nattily dressed and barbered. In

Harry's final interview with him, Cyphre has Christlike long hair and beard, suggesting the Antichrist, who in some traditions is Satan himself returned to Earth. When Harry's Johnny Favorite side murders Epiphany Proudfoot, he is confronted with the girl's child at the murder scene. Epiphany had said that the baby was conceived when she was "mounted by the gods" in a voodoo ceremony ("best fuck I ever had," she says). Thus, when the baby boy points its finger accusingly, or perhaps possessively, at Harry, and its eyes glow red, the suggestion is that the child is Cyphre's and that perhaps it is the Antichrist, not Cyphre.

"BLEST ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN AND YET BELIEVE":  
CRISIS OF BELIEF IN THE SATANIC FILM: *CURSE OF THE DEMON*  
AND *MR. FROST*

In the book of John, Jesus appears to the disciples following his death while the apostle Thomas is not present. When the others tell Thomas of the visitation, he refuses to believe it happened, hence establishing the term "Doubting Thomas." Then Jesus reappears, shows Thomas his wounds and says, "Blest are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29). Thomas's unbelief adds the dramatic conflict needed to make this story compelling.

As we have seen, crisis of belief in one or more of the characters is a narrative element in many if not most occult films. A doubter, like the viewer, has to be convinced, a device to aid in getting viewers to suspend disbelief. Angela Dodson, the detective in *Constantine*, has to learn that there really are demon half-breeds and even card-carrying demons in the world. Father Karras in *The Exorcist* and Detective Kinderman in *Exorcist III* are but two more examples of the theme that occurs in Satanic and other occult film plots. The "Doubting Thomas" character adds dramatic conflict and leads the viewer to the willing suspension of disbelief necessary for the fantasy film. *Curse of the Demon* (1957) is a variation on the cult plot, and *Mr. Frost* (1990) is a possession story of sorts. But while each has elements of conventional Satanic plots, both are interesting concentrations of the Doubting Thomas story in film.

For the most part, *Curse of the Demon*, based on a story by classic horror author M. R. James, is a stylish British horror film from the gifted director Jacques Tourneur (who had started his career with RKO producer Val Lewton) and is a Satanic cult story. It opens with voiceover, telling us that "man, using the magic power of the ancient runic symbols, can call forth the powers of darkness, the demons of

Hell,” and later we see shots of runes carved on one of the Sarsen stones at Stonehenge. This is a truly fictional frame, as there are no runes on the stones. Runes are standard signs of the occult in film, however, and often seem to be based on the exotic characters of the Enochian alphabet, proposed by sixteenth-century occultist John Dee as a means of communicating with angels, or perhaps the angelic script of Cornelius Agrippa.

The film then gives us the story of Dr. John Holden (Dana Andrews), apparently a psychiatrist, who comes to Great Britain to speak at a conference on parapsychology. Holden is a debunker, believing that “demonology and witchcraft have been discredited since the middle ages.” But his British colleague Dr. Harrington, who had been working on an exposé of a Satanic cult led by a man named Karswell (Niall MacGinnis), is murdered by a demon. The police, however, write off his death as accidental, since his car had crashed into electrical poles.

Holden meets Joanna Harrington (Peggy Cummins), Dr. Harrington’s niece, who suspects a supernatural cause of her uncle’s death. Holden scoffs. He is a scientist, after all. But Karswell has translated a book written in an unknown language that gives him the power of the Stonehenge runes. He had put a curse on Harrington, which involves placing a parchment slip with runes on the person of the one cursed, a variation on the occult practice of cursing a person through a personal object, as described in *Rosemary’s Baby*. The film’s dramatic interest is less on the cult than on the gradual change in Holden, from total, closed-minded skepticism, to dawning uncertainty, to belief.

The revised version, released with the title *Night of the Demons*, does this change much better. The producers forced Tourneur to cut *Curse of the Demon*’s length, and the uncut version released as *Night of the Demon*, with additional footage, is a more effective film. For instance, in *Curse of the Demon*, while Karswell is billed as a cult leader, we never see any cult members. Those scenes had hit the cutting-room floor. In one such restored scene from *Night of the Demon*, Holden visits Rand Hobart’s mother. Rand was a former cult member who had been “chosen” (i.e., given the parchment that calls the demon at a certain day and hour) but had given the parchment to a brother, who had then been killed, resulting in a complete mental breakdown for Rand. Holden wants permission to examine Hobart and gets it, but not without confrontation with other cult members, who tell him, “The time will come when they that have no true belief will be accursed.” Gradually, this version of the film leads Holden to belief.

*Mr. Frost* (1990) is the most intellectually satisfying film on the crisis of belief theme and is a variation on the possession and Antichrist plot. In the opening sequence, British police inspector Detweiler (Alan Bates) stumbles onto evidence that a Mr. Frost (Jeff Goldblum) is a serial murderer and torturer when a body is discovered at Frost's posh home. When accused, Frost replies with total candor, "I was just finishing burying it when you showed up." The film jumps forward two years: Frost, who had been judged insane, is being brought to St. Clair, a mental hospital, after refusing to talk at all to the best psychiatrists in Germany and Switzerland. However, when he meets Sarah Day (Kathy Baker), one of the doctors at St. Clair, he speaks to her but no one else. Detweiler, the detective who discovered the crimes, has experienced a spiritual crisis because of Frost, who, he is convinced, is Satan himself.

Indeed, Detweiler seems to be right. Frost catches flies, holds them in his closed hand, and listens to them buzz, one of the few Satanic signs in the film. Satan is, after all, the Lord of the Flies. Sarah, on the other hand, is a scientist and rejects the supernatural. She is, then, the film's Doubting Thomas. When she first interviews Frost, he takes a ring from her, clenches it in his fist, and literally melts it. When she asks him why he chose to speak to her and no one else, he replies that he likes her because she's strong and highly intelligent. Also, she does not "believe in God [and] not in me; you're an integral part of your time; you've got that scientific mind. I need that confrontation." Later he tells her, "I'm darkness. I'm the Prince. All fanatics know about me. They have a greater fear of me than love of their God."

Detweiler is a devout Christian but eventually forms a bond with the atheist Sarah, and the film develops into a confrontation between the two unlikely friends and Frost. Sarah remains the doubter, gradually coming to accept Frost as Satan. Their interviews are fascinating as a comment on modernity. When she asks why he is on Earth, he answers: "I wanted to set some things right. . . . It used to be simple. God on one hand, evil on the other. And there was a struggle. We had a game. And yes, we made it up. And then you came along, the scientists, the geniuses. You're in your heads. You believe in nothing. You care nothing about the human spirit." He finds no passion or enthusiasm in humanity. "I must reveal to the world your impotence in the presence of the age-old power of the wild side."

But Satan has an ego. Later Sarah confronts him. "This Devil idea is hopelessly out of date. It's a faded image. This is a century that belongs to science. Knowledge has replaced faith." She gives him a litany of evils: destruction of rain forests, drugs, atomic weapons, and other banes. "That's evil," she tells Frost. "That's your evil. It's done

every day, it's taken for granted, and man is responsible. You remind me very much of a washed-up actor who's trying to make a comeback and nobody cares a damn." Her words hit home. He is furious, and shouts, "Stop! . . . You talk so much. I can tell you right now I have no answer to that because it takes more than words to understand me."

While she is fascinated with Frost, Sarah abhors his cruelty, and she no longer doubts. Detweiler plans to shoot him, but Sarah steals the former policeman's pistol and confronts Frost at the hospital. Frost tells her, "You believed in me. And now I know that nothing in the world can ever resist me. I'm back. I am strong." When she shoots him, Sarah says, "Stronger than the passing of time" in his voice, and we later see her capture a fly and listen to its buzz. In the tradition of possession and loss of self in the Satanic film, she has become him.

Clearly, *Mr. Frost* rises above Satanic formula plots in discussing human nature and the issue of evil in the world. With Satan as the main character, it is an occult film, but director Setbon abjures most of the usual sign and symbol. Detweiler and Sarah Day offer interesting poles of belief. Detweiler had lost his wife and child to home intruders who murdered them while he was out. His loss and his experience with Frost have led him to become a deeply religious man. He recognizes pure evil because he has accepted pure good. But Sarah Day represents the skepticism and relativism of our time. As a scientist, she had believed only in facts she can observe and classify. Mass murderers like Frost, she believes, should be hospitalized and cured. While the film's moral center does not make Detweiler a hero, its theme shows that Sarah's doubt makes her susceptible to evil and receptive to being taken by it.

SATAN FOR LAUGHS: *THE DEVIL AND MAX DEVLIN, BEDAZZLED*  
(AND REMAKE), *THE DAY OF THE BEAST, REPOSSESSED*, AND  
*LITTLE NICKY*

Oddly enough, Satan, usually portrayed as a looming force of horrifying evil, has often been the butt of comedy. C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape*, one of the better known of literary demons, writes letters to his nephew Wormwood, counseling him on how to damn souls. In one epistle, he notes that one of his advantages is that "devils are predominantly *comic* figures in the modern imagination."<sup>67</sup> As a scholar of early English literature, Lewis would have read the miracle plays of the fourteenth century, in which the Devil gets his due. In the mystery play *The Antichrist* from the Chester cycle, Satan shows up on Earth pretending to be the Messiah. But the prophets Enoch and Eli-

jah as well as the angel Michael arrive to buffet him about, prompting him to cry, "Alas, my wit is in a were [confused]. Now body and soul, both in fere [together] and all goes it to devil." Satan also gets his comic comeuppance in the Chester *Harrowing of Hell*.

Clearly, the tradition of the comic demon has been around for a long time, and the film industry has followed suit with portrayals of Satan that shift emphasis from horror to comedy. But even with the perspective changed to farce, these comic films retain the standard plots of the Satanic film.

For a self-professed family-oriented production company, the Disney Corporation has quite a track record for exploiting the occult. *Red Riding Hood* is a model Wiccan film, *Bedknobs and Broom Sticks* provides more witchery, and the Witch Mountain epics exploit many New Age concepts. So it shouldn't be surprising to find Satan and his minions showing up in *The Devil and Max Devlin* (1981) another Disney production.

Satan and family values might seem hard to reconcile. But in this film, the title character, Max (Elliott Gould), is a rapacious landlord and incorrigible liar, who takes his journey to Hell when one of Satan's minions trips him to fall in front of a bus. Once in The Bad Place, he gets a deal offered by demon Barney Satin (Bill Cosby). If he can corrupt three pure souls within a specified period ("We're looking for fresh, unsullied innocence," says Barney), he can get his life back. But he has to have signed contracts from each.

In a way, it is another Satanic "let's make a deal" film, a variation of the Faust plot. Max tries to corrupt three kids, but, predictably, he doesn't have the necessary killer instinct when it comes to sending them to Hell. He falls for Penny, the mother of one of the kids, and after a good deal of comic bumbling, he makes a decision for good and saves his soul. *The Devil and Max Devlin* is a Disney film after all, and it turns the grim Faustian story, with its emphasis on free will and paying the debt to Satan, into family entertainment.

*Bedazzled*, released in 1967 and remade in 2000, is a far wittier comic version of the Faust theme. In the earlier British version, Stanley Moon (Dudley Moore) is a cook in a London hamburger bar, a born loser who lusts after waitress Margaret Spencer (Eleanor Bron). Depressed at his lot, he tries suicide and even fails at that. But then the Devil (Peter Cook), who calls himself George Spiggott, arrives to make his offer, which Stanley eventually accepts. The Faustian deal is that Stanley gets seven wishes in return for his soul. Like Goethe's Faust, lust is Stanley's downfall, but here his sin is turned into comedy. All of Stanley's wishes focus on having Margaret. But nothing quite works out. George repeatedly puts a canker in the rose that de-

stroys Stanley's wish. The film, then, offers an ironic reversal to the Faust story, in which the character does indeed get his wishes but then must pay the price for them.

Cook and Moore wrote the script, which is filled with clever repartee on subjects ranging from ecology to theology. George's servants are the seven deadly sins (including Raquel Welch, perfectly cast as Lust), and he comments, "I can't get any decent help these days. God's laughing, of course. All he has to do is raise his little finger and he has a thousand prissy little angels dancing about. I'm lumbered with Anger [the bouncer at his club] and Sloth." And when Stanley asks the question that Ingmar Bergman agonized over in his films, why is God so quiet, George's answer reflects a theme so common to the Faust story: "You see his theory, and I'm not knocking it, is that in order for people to be really good, they have to make a free choice between good and evil, and choose good . . . I'm a vital part of his plan. I provide the evil." The Faust character must have free will to choose. Unlike other Faust figures, however, Stanley eventually makes the right choice.

Cook's Devil is, like Satan in so many modern films, quite an amiable fellow. He does indeed play dirty tricks quite casually, ranging from sending pigeons to bomb distinguished men in homburgs to drilling holes in oil tankers. He is appropriately afflicted with the sin of pride. When Stanley asks why he was booted out of Heaven, George admits to pride, the usual motivation for his fall; he'd wanted a little of the adulation from the angels that God was getting. Then when George has met his quota of one hundred billion damned souls (rather like Griffith's Satan) and gets ready for his visit to Heaven (which turns out to be Kew Gardens) to apply for readmission, he's nice enough to let Stanley burn his contract, thinking a good deed might help with God. We even feel a little sorry for George when his application is turned down: he'd made a good choice for the wrong reason.

The 2000 remake of *Bedazzled* has a much more attractive Devil, with the glamorous Elizabeth Hurley playing the part. The film has the same Faust plot but offers a New Age twist. Here, Elliot Richards (Brendan Fraser) works in an office answering repair calls on computers. Like Moore's character, he has no life. He tries to buddy with co-workers, but his friendly-puppy attitude makes them despise him. His secret love is Alison (Frances O'Connor), who does not know he exists. But the rejection of his co-workers and his passion for Alison make him an easy mark for this Devil in a red dress. As in the earlier film, he gets seven wishes, with the same results. He can't get Alison. He always leaves some sort of opening for the Devil to ruin his wish.



cheaply made genre films, ranging from Westerns (probably the most popular of the Bs), to crime stories, to horror films. The double feature is history, but the B movie is very much with us, due in part to the profitable direct-to-video market. Horror movies seem to be the staple product these days, especially vampire epics; but Satanism is another popular subject. The Satanic Bs, which achieve limited or no theatrical release, are indeed legion, far too numerous to discuss in depth; but it is worth noting that they follow the plot lines of their higher-budgeted cousins: exorcism and possession, cult activity, the Faust story, and the return of the Antichrist. A few are worth discussion as adaptations of these themes in teen pictures.

John Carpenter created the slasher film with his 1978 *Halloween*, one of the better horror films in its way but also the source of some of the worst as imitations grew in the night. Carpenter's plot became a formula. A quasi-supernatural killer stalks teenagers in some kind of confined area—an old house, a resort, a hospital. Certain character types recur: the pure heroine, the cool kid, the outsider, the bully, the nerd, and a variety of over-sexed, beer-guzzling teenagers who are fodder for the slasher. The killer, the Other, a nonhuman monster, picks off the teens one at a time, usually in the order of their lack of virtue. The sexually active teens are pretty sure to die, and the pure of heart survive at the fade, while the killer lives for yet another sequel. Poetic justice reigns. So it goes in the Satanic teen B movie, which follows all of the conventions of the Satanic film along with sign, symbol, and paranoid fear of the Other.

And so it goes in *976-EVIL* (1989), a B movie directed by Robert Englund, the Freddie of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. The film adapts the Faust theme and at least made it to theatrical release, inspiring a sequel that did not. Both, however, remain video store favorites. In this true teen film, Spike is the cool kid, the alienated outsider complete with leather jacket, motorcycle, and ponytail. He lives with his aunt (Sandy Dennis), who withholds the inheritance he should rightfully have. Spike (Patrick O'Bryan) defends his hapless cousin Hoax (Stephen Geoffreys) from school bullies. When he finds an advertisement to telephone 976-EVIL for his horoscope, he gets the advice that "a real man has the nerve to take what he deserves." Spike almost takes the advice by shop lifting driving gloves he wants, but changes his mind. In short, he makes the right choices, yet another example of the free will theme in a Faust story.

When Suzy (Lezlie Deane), a pretty blonde, flirts with him, they have sex in his room, which poor downtrodden Hoax watches through their open blind. In the teen formula, this lack of virtue on

their part should doom them, but only Suzy dies by the end. Spike, after all, was not the aggressor, and he makes other moral choices. Eventually, Hoax calls 976-EVIL and makes the wrong choices, becoming a degraded sort of Faust character. The telephone number, a robotic telephone that serves the function of Mephistopheles, tells him how to do magic, a process that involves the *de rigueur* candle-marked circle with reversed pentagram. Appropriately for the teen-movie formula and the Faustian free will theme, only the virtuous, those who have made good choices, survive the spate of poetic justice at the end.

*Satan's Cheerleaders* (1977) adapts the cult and teen plots and features a quartet of nubile nymphette cheerleaders who jiggle their way through the film, both in and out of their micro-mini skirts, and escape a Satanic cult that kidnaps them. The selling point of the film (or low point, depending on the viewer) is a shower room scene that might have inspired the one in *Animal House* a year later.

*Satan's Children* (1975), another cult theme adaptation, is one of the most curious of the Satanic teen films and worth mentioning because it eschews the usual formula. In most Satanic B movies, poetic justice reigns supreme. Not so in *Satan's Children*. Teenager Bobby Douglas (Stephen White) is a male Cinderella of sorts, living with a cruel stepfather and wicked stepsister, both of whom make his life miserable. When he runs away from home, men grab him for a gang rape and leave him naked, by chance outside a Satanic commune that is populated by teenagers and presided over by the enigmatic Simon, a mod, seventies-looking cult leader. Sherry (Kathleen Marie Archer), assistant to Simon, falls in love with the naked Bobby at first sight when they bring him in.

Alas, Sherry is charged for overstepping her authority and Bobby has to declare his manhood, prove she'd been falsely charged, and rescue his lady. His method of proving himself, however, is killing his stepfather and raping his stepsister, and then bringing her to the cult for sacrifice. At the fade, Bobby and Sherry cuddle with romantic folk music in the background, while the cult sacrifices the stepsister and chants praises to their lord Satan. In this unique twist on the Satanic cult plot, evil wins and is made attractive.

*The Black Circle Boys* (1997) seems a moral fable that adapts the teen B Satanic genre rather than a true occult film, but it is probably a truer picture of the Satanic cult than others discussed in this chapter. The film focuses on gang life and a wanna-be Satanic coven. All-American swimmer Kyle Sullivan (Scott Bairstow) must transfer to a new high school, and because he is depressed he becomes enmeshed

in a teen gang, the Black Circle Boys. He undergoes a radical personality change, partly from alienation from his domineering and distant father, partly from drugs, and partly from teen angst. Pretty Chloe (Tara Subkoff) becomes his friend at school, and she is a stabilizing force. But Shane Carver (Eric Mabius), the leader of the gang, has the charisma to attract the angry and alienated Kyle. Thus, he is drawn into the group's drug- and violence-filled lifestyle. They are rock-bottom losers, constantly high on a cornucopia of drugs. They think they can start a heavy-metal rock band: never mind that none of them can play an instrument except Kyle, who has some experience with drums.

But Shane believes in power to be gained from "the Father," who seems to be Satan. "We're talking power—to get anything you want . . . cars, fame, girls, you name it," Shane tells the group. So playing an instrument will be no problem; the Father will provide. Shane says, "He talked to me. He said my father isn't my real father. All this shit we're doing is really for him." Kyle eventually gets enough of gang life, especially after Shane murders one of the group. Getting out, however, is not easy, and Kyle must confront the remaining members of the Black Circle Boys and defeat Shane.

*Black Circle Boys* offers no supernatural incidents. Shane pretends to have occult power, uses an upside-down cross as a symbol for the group, and decorates with upside-down pentagrams. But the plausibility of criminal acts by alienated youth, the real-life equivalent of the "droogies" from *A Clockwork Orange*, is more frightening than special effects magic. A psychologist would say that each of the boys suffers from the malaise common to modern youth. Shane's ramblings about "the Father" have their roots in the absence of a real father in his life, and his emphasis on brotherhood as sacred comes from his lack of a family.

That evil is more interesting than good in literature and film is hardly an original observation. Generations of readers have noted that the scenes in Hell in *Paradise Lost* and Satan's soliloquies are truly arresting, while scenes set in Heaven as God and Christ moralize about their foreknowledge of the fall of both Satan and humanity are far less so. The comparison led British romantic poet Percy Shelley to conclude that Satan was the hero of the work, and fellow romantic William Blake thought that Milton was of the Devil's camp without knowing it. The love/hate relationship of readers and viewers for Satan will no doubt continue to sell books and movie tickets. We can be sure that the best of these films will scare us with signs, symbols, and paranoid fear of the Other peculiar to this subgenre of the horror film. The Devil is in the detail, after all, and the detail of the Satanic

## 4

## Season of the Witch

## WICCA IN FILM

IN MGM'S FILM ADAPTATION OF FRANK BAUM'S *THE WONDERFUL WIZARD of Oz*, Dorothy addresses her first words to her dog after her safe arrival in the magical land: "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more." Sure enough, she isn't. And she is an instant celebrity in Oz, since she has inadvertently landed on the Wicked Witch of the East, kicking off the film's first production number "Ding, Dong, the Witch Is Dead" by the assembled Munchkins. The wicked Witches of the East and West certainly represent the common view of witches when the film appeared in 1939—evil old women who do nasty things to children.

But witchcraft wears two faces in Oz. Soon after her arrival, Dorothy meets another witch, a lovely lady who arrives in a translucent bubble and greets her by saying, "I'm Glinda, the Witch of the North." "You are?" exclaims the wide-eyed Dorothy, "I beg your pardon, but I've never heard of a beautiful witch before." Baum and MGM accidentally captured the modern view of witchcraft, which sees witches of the left-hand and right-hand paths, with images ranging from Shakespeare's crones muttering "Double, double, toil and trouble" in *Macbeth* to Samantha twitching her perky nose in *Be-witched*.

Both kinds of witchcraft offer fertile fields for film plots. Evil witches of the type from stories like those of Snow White and Hänsel and Gretel were the norm in literature until the second half of the twentieth century. The doings in Salem, where nineteen innocent people were hanged and one pressed to death as witches during the 1692 witchcraft trials, were an event that has captured the American popular imagination ever since, and created a more suspicious view of witchcraft charges. The twenty deaths were a puny number when compared with various witch hunts during Europe's Middle Ages and Renaissance—variously estimated at up to nine million executions.

These witches, the Church taught, were the Devil's servants, but by the twentieth century, doubts prevailed.

Witchcraft's rise toward respectability as a religion began in the 1930s with the birth of neo-paganism and Wicca. The two terms are not synonymous but are closely related. *Neo-Paganism* is the broader one, describing the wide range of modern pagan religious revivals from Druidism, to Greco-Roman, to Shamanism, and even to a Church of All Worlds, the religion Robert Heinlein dreamed up for his novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.<sup>1</sup> All of these Pagan paths have a common root in the occult, as adherents practice some form of ceremonial magic or other approach to the arcane. Wicca might be described as one path of neo-paganism. Followers believe Wicca was the religion of old Europe, prior to Christianity, and they embrace the title of witch. These are the Glinda the Good sort of witches, practitioners of the right-hand path or white magic. Setians and Church of Satan members avowedly follow the left-hand path. Recent films that portray witchcraft, positively or negatively, usually allude to Wicca rather than the broader concept of neo-paganism, so I'll refer to *Wicca* along with *The Craft* and *The Old Religion*, as Wiccans fondly call their path. The word *Wicca* comes from the Anglo-Saxon language and translates roughly as *witch*. Thus modern pagans who follow this path have embraced the word for those who practice their religion.

As do other occult paths, Wicca offers an excellent fictional frame, especially because of the sensational connotations of witchcraft. Wiccan films turn up in unlikely venues. For instance, *Red Riding Hood* (1988), a film that ran for years on the Disney Channel, is a musical version of the old story that gives it a new spin while retaining its medieval setting. In this telling, Red Riding Hood is Linet (Amelia Shankley), and her father, Percival, is lord of the local castle; but he is missing in action after defeating his enemies in a war. Meanwhile, his evil brother Godfrey (Craig T. Nelson plays both Percival and Godfrey) rules the realm and lusts for Linet's mother, Lady Jean (Isabella Rossellini). Godfrey, we learn, has sold his soul for dark powers, including control over the Big Bad Wolf, a shape changer in this adaptation of the story.

This version of the ancient tale gives us a very different grandmother. Granny is the village wise woman, and in an early scene, we see her healing with a magic spell a man who has been badly beaten by Godfrey's soldiers. Her magic involves herbs, chanting, and a circle of stones placed about the injured man. The wounds then simply disappear. She also puts a spell on Linet's red cloak, promising that it will ward off danger and perhaps let the child see elves, her heart's desire.

Linnet likes the cloak and exclaims to Lady Jean, "It's magic, Mother." Jean smiles indulgently and says to Granny, "You have to be careful of what you say and do. People will say you are a witch." Granny smiles in return and responds, "Just because I know a few things doesn't make me a witch. But just to be on the safe side, let's keep it a secret."

Wiccans would immediately recognize elements of the Old Religion in *Red Riding Hood*, and it is one of the more interesting examples of the Wiccan film. Unlike *Red Riding Hood*, whose target audience is children, most early films focusing on witchcraft have their roots in the B horror genre and are marketed to the audience that enjoys such fare; but they shed light on important cultural issues. They offer insights not only into the new religious movement that underpins them, but also into society's ambivalent and changing attitudes toward religious diversity and the empowerment of women.

As is the case with all occult religions, definitions of neo-paganism in general and Wicca specifically are slippery. Books on the subject abound, as a perusal of the New Age section of any bookstore will attest. But practicing Wiccans tell me that "professional witches," those who write books on the subject, are not always reliable sources, as *The Craft* is anarchic by nature. Beyond occult practices and what is probably a universal polytheism, more precise delineation of Wiccan beliefs can be elusive; however, Wiccans are becoming increasingly visible, with Internet interest groups springing up and more and more witches "coming out." One often sees bumper stickers with "Pagan Pride" or "Witch on Board." However, most Wiccans practice their religion quietly, attracting no attention.

Little demographic information on Wicca and neo-paganism exists, but certain surface evidence can be cited. Most cities have one or more occult (or "metaphysical") bookstores that sell Wiccan paraphernalia and books, as well as some sort of Pagan festival, usually around the time of Beltane (sometimes called Walpurgis Night) at the beginning of May. My Pagan contacts in Kansas City, Missouri, for instance, the heart of the Bible belt, tell me that the annual Pagan Fest has attracted from three to four hundred participants for the last few years at a week-long celebration. In 1992, Aidan Kelly, allowing himself generous latitude, estimated between 83,000 and 333,000 Pagans of all sorts in the United States and noted that neo-pagans rate in the top twenty percent of literacy. Kelley bases his figures on book sales, lists of newsletters, and other data. But the anarchic nature of the religion makes any reliable figures impossible to gather. Kelly quips that "organizing a standing church for witches is a lot like trying to get anarchists together to elect someone an anarch."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the numbers are

anyone's guess, but the extraordinary number of Wiccan and Pagan Web sites and e-mail lists suggests that Kelly's figures are on the low side for the twenty-first century. *Witchvox.com*, for instance, boasts 5,000 Pagan Web links and refers to one million U.S. Pagans. Thus, Wiccans and other assorted neo-pagans and occultists, as well as the enormous number of New Agers sympathetic to Wiccan ideas, represent a sizable market for theater tickets, videotape purchase and rental, music, and books. However, despite the huge potential audience, most filmmakers hedge, showing both positive and negative aspects of the occult, and as in other occult films, those using the Craft as frame nearly always include a cautionary tale motif.

Indeed, social forces in this country dictate such a practice by the faint of heart. The emergence of the new occult has brought a powerful response from conservative Christians who label it part of a great Satanic plot. Especially worrisome to Pagans are political figures from the religious right, such as Pat Robertson, who lump Wicca and neo-pagan occultists with the New Age and brand all of these movements as Satanic. "New Age is another term for Occult," Robertson writes, and goes on to assert that all occult groups "bear the immutable brand of Satan."<sup>3</sup> Then two days after the September 11th, 2001, attack, during a 700 Club session, Robertson's fellow televangelist Jerry Falwell said, "I really believe that the Pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians, . . . the ACLU, People For the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this [terrorist attack] happen.'" Wiccans feel that the political influence of powerful figures of the religious right prevents the recognition of their religion. They would point to an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article<sup>4</sup> in which the widow of a decorated army sergeant killed in Iraq complains that the Department of Defense does not recognize the pentangle in a circle as one of the accepted thirty approved religious symbols for markers in veterans' cemeteries.

#### DRAWING DOWN THE MOON: WICCAN PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

Wiccan practices vary a good deal. Witches meet in covens (usually no more than thirteen members). Each coven decides on its rituals and practices: indeed, they are the ultimate Congregationalists. But some generalizations are possible. Wiccans feel a strong sympathy for the Middle Ages. Their monomyth posits a sort of early golden age when Paganism existed as a religion that focused worship on the goddess and her consort Cernunnos, the horned, hooped hunting god,

generalizations about demographics as do exist are always sketchy or questionable. In a survey conducted during the early 1980s, Margo Adler found that nearly all Pagans were white, relatively young and well off, and middle class or above. She also found that a sizable percentage of Craft practitioners made their living working with technology in some way, an interesting point considering the survey was done before the proliferation of computers.<sup>9</sup> The plethora of books marketed to assorted Pagan paths suggests a highly literate group.

Each coven, then, may create its own rituals and record them in its own book of shadows or grimoire, or buy one from the many that are published. Wiccans follow several recognized paths, such as Alexandrian (named for Alex Sanders, the British witch), Gardnerian (for Gerald Gardner), or Dianic (the feminist approach). One casts such a wide net in using the words *neo-pagan* or *Wicca* that any sort of definition is immediately suspect. Characteristically, however, those who follow the European or Wiccan Pagan model meet for lunar holy dates that they associate with ancient paganism: Beltane, Samhain, and Yule, for instance—holy dates, they say, that were co-opted by Christianity. Most meetings consist of dance and song, sometimes in robes and sometimes “sky clad,” or nude. Meetings may involve the ceremonial casting of a circle, the use of the athame (the ceremonial knife), pentangle symbols (with the point up, not down, as in Satanism), and candles.

The majority of covens practice some sort of ritual magic, which some describe in the oft-quoted definition of Aleister Crowley—achieving change through “the science and art” of arcane practice—or by others as consciousness-raising and self-help therapy. The central focus of the coven meeting for those following the European model is “drawing down the moon.” In this ceremony, many Wiccans believe, the Goddess incarnates herself in the priestess, while the priest in mixed covens may become the Horned God, resulting in some covens in the Great Rite, a sexual union of the priest and priestess as avatars of the God and Goddess. The scene from both novel and film version of *The Da Vinci Code* in which Sophie blunders into what Wiccans would recognize as a coven ceremony and sees her grandfather engaged in sex with a beautiful woman is an allusion to the Great Rite.

Fieldwork and reading of neo-pagan books leaves the sense that the feminist path is the one most traveled. The Wiccan monomyth’s focus on the Goddess has exerted a strong pull on those who seek empowerment for women and a spiritual path without what they perceive to be the patriarchal spin of established Christianity. Approaches range from the more moderate feminism of Starhawk (*The Spiral Dance* and



*Dreaming the Dark*) to the lesbian feminism of Zsuzanna Budapest. Some women who follow the Dianic path exclude men from participation in their coven ceremonies. Zsuzanna Budapest cites the manifesto of the Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 12: "We are opposed to teaching our magic and our craft to men until the equality of the sexes is a reality."<sup>10</sup> Margo Adler, whose *Drawing Down the Moon* is an excellent beginning point for studying all Pagan approaches, takes a less exclusive position. But the description of her own experience of finding neo-paganism sums up the appeal of The Craft to women very well:

Paganism allows women to come to a sense of their own divinity: to understand that they are in themselves, Goddess. And that's of course, what "drawing down the moon"—the title of the ceremony that I took as the title of my book—means. It is a very subversive ceremony in the sense that the woman in the ritual becomes the Goddess. She draws down into herself, she evokes, depending on your point of view, the Goddess. And she takes on that role, she acts out, in rite and ritual, or she becomes, if you will, the Goddess, Herself. And she can understand and gain the feeling inside of what it would be like to be that strong, to have that kind of self and wholeness, to act as the strong Goddess of old. For me, hearing that ritual for the first time, with its stirring words, "these are the words of the Great Mother, who was of old also called Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melicine, and many other names—for me, that was the beginning . . . of my own journey into the neo-pagan experience."<sup>11</sup>

Most Wiccans, especially those in the Dianic path, exalt womanhood's three stages as maiden, mother, and crone—stages roughly synonymous with the Triple Goddess Concept, and references that recur throughout Wiccan literature. Zsuzanna Budapest writes, "The Christian Trinity is a direct plagiarism from this much older religious concept, except it has been masculinized into the three aspects of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> This veneration for the feminine in nature and the stages of womanhood brings us back to *Red Riding Hood*. The film shows Red Riding Hood as maiden, Lady Jean as mother, and Granny as crone. Moreover, these three represent the kind of independent women whom feminist Wiccans would admire. The script establishes Linet as strong and fearless. After a Woodsman saves the girl when she is pursued by the shape changer at the start of the film, he says to Lady Jean, "She has no fear, that child." "That's right. That's how I want her to be," responds Lady Jean.

Also, Wiccans ardently deny any connection with Satanism. While few Pagans would deny the existence of Satanic groups, they angrily reject any suggestion of a connection between their religion and the

who lets her go undercover to spy on them. He tells her: "Hundreds of years ago, thousands perhaps, a sect, a cult was developed, which worshipped a pre-Christian horned god, dedicated to destruction, damnation, and the weakness of the flesh. Some are thought to have eternal life, granted to them by Satan. I believe they have returned." The Horned God, Cernunnos, is the male version of the deity in Wiccan ceremonies, but *Prime Evil* mixes Satan and the hunting god, just as Wiccans say the Church did during the Burning Times.

At any rate, the evil group is led by the sinister Father Thomas Seaton (William Beckwith), Satan's right-hand man. Seaton explains his group and its relationship to the Church to one of his victims. "Do you know that we were once part of that church? We were a medieval order that broke away in the 1300s during the plague. Since then, we have been renegades. But we have always operated from the Church. The devil's powers are stronger on consecrated grounds. The Devil is a fallen angel." The Church as the setting for Satanic sabbats is deeply embedded in legend and folklore, and portraying this group as having infiltrated the Catholic Church and existing hidden there is another appeal to paranoia about territorial invaders. The rest of the story hinges on Seaton capturing other women, his Svengali relationship with Alexandra Parkman as he draws her to trust him, and finally the big night of the attempted sacrifice, when Sister Angela puts a crimp in his plans. The plot is thin gruel indeed, and film's only real interest for viewers interested in the occult is the morphing of Wiccan practices into Satanism.

*Night of the Eagle* (1962), loosely adapted from Fritz Leiber's novel *Conjure Wife*, contrasts a good witch and one who practices magic from the left-hand path. Norman Taylor (Peter Wyngarde), a promising young sociology professor, discovers that much of his success comes from his devoted wife Tansy's witchcraft (played by Janet Blair). He is a most ardent doubter in the film, a complete rationalist. Thinking his wife's belief that she can do magic is a mental flaw, he insists that she desist. When she sneaks in a spell or two on his behalf, he burns all her magical apparatus.

He must then learn to his sorrow that her magic was not only real but was protecting him from the dark magic of an evil witch who wishes him harm. *Night of the Eagle* then devolves into a horror film, with Norman coming to understand the truth of the occult and having to rescue his wife, who is at the mercy of the witch after he destroyed her magical tools. Both novel and film precede the growth of Wicca, and there is certainly no reference to Tansy's doings as part of a religion. But modern witches would find some of her magical tools famil-

iar, and the juxtaposition of left- and right-hand paths would become part of many Wiccan film plots.

### THE MATTER OF SALEM: *THE CRUCIBLE*

Hundreds of stories have been written about King Arthur from the Middle Ages to the present, creating a mythos that permeates Western culture. These tales came to be called the *Matter of Arthur*, stories featuring a cast of characters from the Arthurian court, their amours, and their adventures. The story that unfolded in January 1692, when Elizabeth Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams began the antics that led to the executions on witchcraft charges in Salem, has no knights saving fair ladies. But these events and characters have so thoroughly permeated the American popular imagination that the story might justly be called the *Matter of Salem*. Dozens of stories have been written that have immortalized the names of those involved: the slave girl Tituba, Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, Martha Corey, and many others. Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel *The Scarlet Letter* and short story "Young Goodman Brown," for instance, include some of these characters. Films have also capitalized on the *Matter of Salem*. One of the most interesting is *The Crucible* (1996), an adaptation of Arthur Miller's play of the same title, which uses the witchcraft mania as a metaphor for the Communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Miller also wrote the script for this film.

The Puritans of Salem were minor players in the worldwide pattern of witch executions. But Miller catches the interplay of motives as people were accused and tried. All the names from the Matter of Salem remain the same, but Miller includes a base of fiction, including a quite pagan-looking romp in the forest by the group of adolescent girls who would be featured during the trials. Tituba, Reverend Parris's West Indian slave, casts a convincingly occult-looking circle in the woods around a fire and the girls ask for spells to charm the men they want to marry. To their misfortune, Reverend Parris catches them (one naked) dancing around the fire, and to avoid being charged with witchcraft, the girls, led by Abigail Williams (Winona Ryder), contend that they were possessed. And so the accusations begin. The film's Abigail, who is portrayed as a young woman in the film but who was only eleven in the historical situation, had previously been a servant in the home of John Proctor (Daniel Day-Lewis), and they had had a very brief affair, leading the young Abigail to dream of marriage if he would leave his wife. But Proctor has completely rejected the young woman.

The John Proctor/Abigail affair is fiction added to the real events for dramatic effect. But the rest of the film uses the story of the trials as frame for portraying the persecution of women (the first several accused were good models for the Wiccan crone, including one who was a midwife); greed for neighbors' land; and payback for real or imagined offenses. The dramatic center of the film is John Proctor and his wife, both of whom are accused by the love-crazed Abigail. The Proctors are sane voices in a community gone mad. John must ultimately decide whether to hold onto his principles or, in order to save himself, lie and perhaps give names of others who would then be accused.

Miller's play had topical importance when it was first staged in 1953. Clearly, the playwright intended his audience to see the parallel between unfounded accusations against people in 1690 and much the same sort of accusations against those accused of being Communist agents by Senator McCarthy and his Committee. Many of Miller's friends were blacklisted from Hollywood and the Broadway stage because they might have been members of an organization with leftist leanings in their youth. Miller's play made an important statement on its time. But as Midge Dector points out, McCarthyism was part of a larger syndrome. Dector observes that the play and the film "speak to such problems as the bigotry of religious fundamentalists and communities torn apart by accusations of child abuse. In other words, now as ever, falsehood has a million friends, the truth but few."<sup>15</sup>

The *Matter of Salem* theme, so cogently dramatized in Miller's play and film, appears repeatedly in film in different forms. One plotline has Salem witches somehow time-traveling or being reincarnated to the present, as in the entertaining *Warlock* (1991) and its less effective sequels or B movies like *Witchcraft* (1988) and some of the other twelve revivals in this curiously long-lived franchise of direct-to-video productions. *Hocus Pocus* (1993), a Disney comedy, brings the wicked Sanderson sisters, wicked witches hanged in Salem, back to the present day where they bumble about in culture shock looking for the life force of children. Another favorite theme is "the witches' revenge" plot, in which the sins of the fathers, or at least the ancestors, are visited on their modern-day descendants, as in *The Devonsville Terror* (1983), which has maintained a steady presence in video rental stores. So it goes too in the delightful René Clair-directed version of a Thorne Smith novel *I Married a Witch* (1942) in which a witch (a stunningly beautiful Veronica Lake) and her Warlock father were executed in Salem but manage to be reborn to torment the descendants of the family responsible for their demise.

DEMONIZING THE SACRED FEMININE:  
*WITCHCRAFT THROUGH THE AGES, THE WITCHES' HAMMER,*  
*SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT IV, SUSPIRIA, AND INFERNO*

Feminist Wiccans insist that beginning in the fifteenth century and lasting through the seventeenth, organized Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, carried on a war against women. Estimates vary on the number of deaths. According to Starhawk in *The Spiral Dance*, over nine million people were tortured into confessions and executed.<sup>16</sup> Women, especially the elderly, those who might be called crones in the Wiccan model of womanhood, were prime targets for accusations in the witch pogroms.

Mistrust of the feminine, Wiccans insist, was at the core of the Church's war against witches, but there were economic reasons as well. As dramatized in *The Crucible*, accusing neighbors of witchcraft was a good way of getting their property, which would be confiscated if a conviction resulted. Moreover, the accusation could be a means of settling an old score. Two films, *Witchcraft Through the Ages* (Danish title *Häxan*) and *The Witches' Hammer*, dramatize the interplay of these elements in historical witch trials.

Benjamin Christensen's 1921 *Witchcraft Through the Ages* combines documentary and fictional style in tracing the history of witch persecutions. While Christensen's intentions are with the angels in condemning the Inquisition and the torture and persecution of women, the conclusion of his film would surely set feminists' teeth on edge. The film's opening scenes show the traditional view of witches and the Devil's power from the perspective of the Inquisition, with crones dancing about their bubbling cauldrons and riding brooms to meet with Satan and give the traditional kiss to his backside. Then the perspective shifts to the torture and persecution of women accused by the Inquisition, with text on screen claiming that eight million people were executed. Christensen certainly paints the Inquisition as the villain of the piece, with the opening scenes showing the superstition it propagated and the resulting horrors of the witch trials.

But in the final portion of the film, Christensen brings us to the twentieth century with an explanation that would be anathema to feminists of why women confessed to pacts with Satan during the Middle Ages. In a dramatization, he portrays a contemporary young woman who is the victim of sleepwalking and has an obsession with fire. Her learned doctor diagnoses her with hysteria. Obviously, he's read his Freud,<sup>17</sup> and makes a case that women fantasize all sorts of

sins. Christensen shows flashbacks of cloistered nuns in the Middle Ages imagining that they consorted with Satan, victims, Christensen says, of sexual repression resulting in hysteria. Today, women object to the blanket diagnosis of female emotional problems as hysteria, which early psychoanalysts considered a fundamental condition of their gender.

*The Witches' Hammer*, a Czech film from 1970, is another portrayal of the Burning Times. The film adapts records of actual witch trials in Velké Losing and Sumperk in medieval Eastern Europe and gives special emphasis to misogyny. The opening footage, like that of *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, uses irony in showing the Inquisition's point of view. We get cross-cuts of two scenes. One is a close-up of a mad-looking priest who begins with "Sin reached the world. Woman is sin." He goes on, "The root of evil is her insatiable carnal desire. Woman practices sorcery with the Devil who approaches her in the shape of a man." As he speaks, the director cuts to scenes of women enjoying the innocent sensuality of massages and baths at a local bath house.

The witch hunt in Volké Losing begins when an old woman is caught stealing the Host at a local church, intending, she tells authorities, to heal a neighbor's sick cow with it. Church officials suspect the worst—the use of the Host in witchcraft. The local administrator hires Boblig, a failed lawyer reduced to running an inn, to conduct inquiries. Boblig eagerly accepts, as he knows an opportunity when he sees one. Those convicted of witchcraft lose their property to pay court expenses. "Find out what these people's financial situation is," he tells his assistant, "everything, especially these people's wealth."

*The Witches' Hammer* is a translation of the title of the infamous *Malleus Malificarum*, the medieval Church's manual on how to find and punish witches; and the film makes clear the connection between the institution's distrust of all things feminine and the economic motives of witch persecutions. Moreover, it demonstrates the power of the prosecutor, who manages to accuse anyone who objects to his methods and practices in order to maintain entrenched power, as did the girls who accused their neighbors in Salem. There is no happy ending, as Boblig kept his position for many years and condemned over 300 people, mostly women but also men whose property he could acquire.

*Witchcraft Through the Ages* and *The Witches' Hammer* are docudramas, dramatizing what Wiccans would call the "war against the women" and the misogyny of religious authorities. A few more recent dramatic films reflect a level of prejudice against Wicca and the

feminine empowerment it embodies that one might expect from the medieval church rather than an enlightened era.

Most of the early films that portray Wicca in some sort of knowledgeable way are the contemporary equivalent of B movies, often seen on late-night TV these days and standards in video stores. A film with the unpromising title *Silent Night, Deadly Night IV: The Initiation* (1990)<sup>18</sup> offers an example. The film is truly ephemeral, but it merits discussion for its cultural implications as one of several interesting reactions in film not only against Wicca but as a quite misogynist response to the feminist path of the Craft and to the empowerment of women in general.

In the film, Kim Levitt (Neith Hunter), a young woman with a cub reporter job, investigates the bizarre death of a young woman, seemingly by spontaneous combustion. In the process, she meets three women who take a strong interest in her. Fima (Maud Adams), who seems to be in her mid-forties, owns a bookstore. Katherine, Fima's friend, appears to be in her sixties; and Jane, in her twenties, is the third member of the group. The film makes their Wiccan practices obvious, and as the story progresses, the three try to initiate Kim into their coven, using drugs to lead her to psychedelic experiences. The conflict of the film includes Kim's alternate attraction toward and feelings of revulsion against their urgings.

On one level, *The Initiation* is for the slasher audience. Director Brian Yuzna builds in plenty of cinematic gore for them. But the viewer knowledgeable of Wicca will see quite another film, an attack on the feminist branch of the Old Religion. Emily Edwards writes, "Though the New Age witch portrayed in popular media frequently called herself a Wiccan, this is really too specific to describe the character. The New Age witch uses a mixture of customs and ceremonies newly invented by the witch herself or adopted from a variety of magical traditions."<sup>19</sup> Edwards is correct in her assessment of the Craft. There really is no accepted way of being a Wiccan; and while covens may follow a particular path in the Craft, they invent much of their own ceremony. But certain symbols and common practices in the Wiccan tradition persist, and many of them appear in *The Initiation*. While even a viewer unaware of its allusions to Wicca would surely recognize the film's misogyny, only those who understand its symbolism and ceremonies would perceive the demonizing of The Craft.

That the three women are a coven is clear in the context of the film. Fima represents the mother portion of the Triple Goddess. Katherine is the crone. When Fima introduces her to Kim as "our wise mother," Katherine responds modestly, "an old crone, really." Moreover, Fima

tation or to feminine empowerment will surely feel gratified that evil has been punished. But few viewers would recognize what Fima and her friends really represent and see the film's skewed portrayal of Wicca.

One can imagine that a Wiccan audience, especially viewers from the feminist wing of the Craft, would be horrified at the film's portrayal of their religion. *The Initiation* gives an almost exclusively negative view of the Old Religion, a cautionary tale taken to an extreme. From a cultural perspective, it seems a reaction to the subversive nature of both feminism and neo-paganism. Yet even this sexist plot waffles a bit. The boorishness of Hank's father (the stereotype of the dominating male) and the blatant chauvinism of Kim's boss at the newspaper office offer some criticism of patriarchal behavior toward the young woman. But these incidents seem only a sop to disguise an otherwise misogynist film.

Director Dario Argento has established a reputation in the horror genre for B movies that rise above formula and show a unique visual style. Douglas Winter calls Argento "the most important and influential of contemporary directors of the horror film." Winter writes that "Argento's penchant for pyrotechnics of sight and sound suggest a cinematic opera, in which the embrace of violence approaches the classical."<sup>20</sup> But Argento's films have quite a different reputation among feminist critics for their explicit visual brutalization of women. Indeed, *Susperia* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980), two parts of an unfinished trilogy, seem even more misogynist than *The Initiation*. In *Susperia*, Argento blends the traditional Christian view of witches with allusions to Wicca, specifically the lesbian wing of The Craft.

The heroine, Suzy Bannion (Jessica Harper), travels to Germany to study in a renowned dance academy. When she arrives in the middle of a pouring rain, she sees a young woman rush out of the academy, then pause to talk to an unseen person inside. Suzy can make out only a few words from the distance. But the girl runs away, and when Suzy goes to the door, she cannot gain admittance. The scene then shifts to the girl Suzy has seen leaving and her arrival at a friend's house, where both she and her friend are killed under particularly gory circumstances, while the camera lingers with loving attention on their fear. These events establish the film's mystery. The plot then meanders rather aimlessly through its middle section, with the film depending on Argento's signature stylistic effects for suspense.

Suzy, who stays elsewhere for the night, returns to the academy, where she is finally admitted, with apologies for inconvenience, and enrolled. As the plot develops, Suzy gradually learns that the academy is the front for a coven of witches, dominated by Helena Marcos, a



two sequences. At the outset, the girl at the academy's door is terrorized by the sight of inhuman eyes staring at her through a window, and we see her pulled through the window and stabbed repeatedly with a phallic-looking knife by a hairy male arm, then her body dropped through a multicolored skylight, where it hangs from a rope. Her friend, with whom she is staying, then dies also in the rain of sharp pieces of glass.

The film alludes to Wicca in other ways. The dance academy is, except for a couple of male students and the Igor-like custodian, almost exclusively female. The spiral dance and the cone of power it is said to raise have become a sort of trademark of Wicca, and the scenes on the dance floor showing the spiraling movements of the students (which make a nice girl like Suzy quite ill) suggest the Old Religion. Then Sarah, Suzy's friend who warns of dire doings afoot, becomes enmeshed in spiral coils of wire when she tries to track footsteps she hears overhead before she is stabbed, again repeatedly and in sadistic detail.

*Inferno*, the companion film to *Suspiria*, continues the witchcraft theme. In *Inferno*, Rose Elliot (Irene Miracle), a young woman who lives in a shabby-genteel New York apartment building, finds a book titled *The Three Mothers* in an antique store, written by a self-proclaimed alchemist named Varelli. He claims three witches, *Suspiriorum*, *Tenebrarum*, and *Lachrymarium*, plan to conquer the world. *Suspiriorum* was dispatched in *Suspiria*. But Rose suspects, correctly as it turns out, that the building she lives in is the headquarters of Mother *Tenebrarum*. She writes to her brother Mark (Leigh McCloskey), who is studying music in Rome. The letter is lost before he can read it, but when his friend Sara is murdered, he goes to New York to find his sister. Rose's discovery of the book and her letter set off a series of bizarre murders in New York and Rome as Mother *Tenebrarum* tracks down everyone who has touched or heard of Varelli's book.

Remnants of the Wiccan frame established in *Susperia* remain in *Inferno*, including the Three Mothers concept. Fisher quotes Argento as saying that he took the idea from a reference to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.<sup>21</sup> But the Three Mothers as the film establishes them also parallel the Triple Goddess of the Old Religion. In fact, Wiccans with whom I have spoken have referred to the Triple Goddess as The Mothers. A more specific reference to the Triple Goddess appears in the film, however, when Mark, a rather wimpish hero at best, awakes with the camera focusing, for point of view, on three women of the hotel's establishment looking down on him, of appropriate ages to be maiden, mother, and crone.

Like *Suspiria*, *Inferno* mixes the traditional Christian view of witches with Wiccan allusions. Reptilian images recur throughout, from flash cuts of statuettes to the emblem on the front of the hotel. A veritable clowder of cats, always the familiar of witches in stories, swarm around Tenebrarum's building. And when Kazanian, the antique dealer who sells Rose the book, complains of them, Tenebrarum murders him, appropriately during an eclipse of the full moon, an auspicious occasion for Wiccans, whose celebrations follow lunar patterns.

Argento is clearly not in the Val Lewton school of horror film. While Lewton creates vicarious terror in the audience by suggestion, Argento assaults the senses. In *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, he colors the screen in garish shades of red and blue, with an occasional intrusion of greens. The rock group Goblin furnishes the background sounds for *Suspiria*, with constant sighs and groans.

Argento's admirers defend the director's films, and Adam Knee finds that in *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, "what is clear in any event is that it becomes increasingly difficult to simply attribute the murder and violence in Argento's film to sadistic male agencies."<sup>22</sup> While it is true enough that the weird sisters are behind the killings, the murders are carried out with close-ups of an unmistakably male arm, and the camera accents the terror and pain of the women killed in loving detail in unnecessarily extended sequences. The fact that Argento furnishes the arm that wields the phallic knife in *Suspiria* (his version of a Hitchcock-like directorial appearance) does not bolster an argument that denies the film's misogyny. Argento has inspired a cult following, but the films' blatant sexism makes *Suspiria* and *Inferno* seem products of the heated imagination of a hormonally challenged teenager with issues about his own sexuality.

#### THE JANUS APPROACH TO WICCA: *SEASON OF THE WITCH* AND *THE WICKER MAN*

The Roman god of gates was Janus, who is portrayed with two faces looking in different directions, for gates, after all, facilitate both coming and going. So it goes in *The Wicker Man* (1973, remade in 2006) and *Season of the Witch* (1976), originally titled *Jack's Wife*, also known as *Hungry Wives*. Each offers alternative views of the Craft, depending, no doubt, on what the viewer brings to the viewing. Stanley Fish and his followers brought a radical new approach to literary criticism with his reader-response methodology in a remarkable series of essays, eventually published in book form under the title *Is*

*There a Text in This Class?* Because of his rather combative defense of the reader's role, he has attracted a following that some unidentified wit has labeled the School of Fish.

Professor Fish challenged a dictum that was long held in criticism—the affective fallacy. Wimsatt and Beardsley defined it as “a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*).” This sort of thinking leads to “impressionism and relativism” with the outcome being that the work “as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.”<sup>23</sup> It is easy to demonstrate, however, that different readers (or viewers of film) can produce quite different interpretations and furnish convincing evidence from the text. Thus, the consistent problem with which Fish wrestled in his discussion of the relationship between reader and work was the authority of the text and the charge of relativism by his critics—that with his approach, the work could mean anything one wanted it to. Fish proposes a phenomenological approach, asserting that the work comes into existence when the reader interacts with it. But his critics charged that his theory was simply a disguised sort of formalism, pointing out that he kept returning to the text in his criticism. Eventually he resolved the issue. The text does indeed have formal patterns, but they only come into being by the interpretive act. “The facts one points to are still there . . . but only as a consequence of the interpretive (man-made) model that has called them into being.”<sup>24</sup> To the charges of relativism, he responds that interpretive strategies arise from the “community of readers” to which they belong, a community based on values and experiences brought to the reading, or in this case, viewing.

While this approach certainly has relevance to all literature and film, it seems imminently appropriate to the occult film and particularly to a discussion of *The Wicker Man* and *Season of the Witch*. Each film adapts Wicca as a frame, and each has inspired positive responses from Pagan audiences. But each film also supports a negative view of the Craft from viewers disposed to see it in that way. An especially interesting aspect and one that makes them especially appropriate for a reader response approach is that the directors of each have stated in interviews that they intended their films to be a warning about the dangers of the occult. As we have seen, the cautionary tale theme and ambivalence toward the occult are built into most occult films. That ambivalence suggests the filmmaker's recognition that the film will inspire different responses from different communities of viewers. *Season of the Witch* and *The Wicker Man*, however, offer excellent examples of films that support not only interpretations that depend on what the viewer brings to the film but interpretations that point to

issues of conflict in our society; and the viewers' response is influenced by their position on these conflicts.

*The Wicker Man*, a 1973 British film, scripted by Anthony Shaffer and directed by Robin Hardy, is best understood in the light of reader-response criticism. It is a cult classic among Wiccans and other neo-pagans, and no discussion of the Wiccan film would be complete without it. Christopher Lee, who stars as the pagan Lord Summerisle in the film, called it "the one I would take with me to a desert island" and "a flawed masterpiece,"<sup>25</sup> high praise from this distinguished actor. Lee attributes the film's flaws to British Lion Studios cutting eighteen minutes from the 101-minute length of the version that survived a first editing, with another twenty or so minutes deleted that Lee and Hardy expected to be included when they finished shooting. Most of the DVD versions on the market are based on a 78-minute eviscerated print, but at this writing, Hardy souls (so to speak) can find the 101-minute film with diligent searching. Here I discuss only the shorter version, as it is the one most viewers would be likely to see in video.

Like *Season of the Witch*, *The Wicker Man* and its 2006 remake are particularly interesting in showing the likely responses of different communities of viewers. Wicca men and Wicca women will see a generally favorable view of the Craft in the original, though Hardy and Shaffer claim they intended a cautionary tale about the danger of cults, and many viewers will share this interpretation. In an interview included with the DVD version of the film, Hardy discusses his interest in primitive religious practice (apparently taken from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*) and actually refers to medieval paganism as Satanic. An interviewer reports Hardy as insisting "he is particularly keen that the authorial approach should not be read as either pro-pagan or, more generally, pro-counterculture." He said that he and Shaffer had not met any Pagans before filming and claimed that his first encounter with real Pagans had been at a launch of the film in San Francisco. They loved the film, Hardy reports, but were too stoned to be taken very seriously.<sup>26</sup> Hardy said in another interview, "'It's not for nothing that active paganism is for the most part gone. For one thing, it keeps people in the thrall of superstition. Maybe it's not too big a connection to make between the final scene of *The Wicker Man* and the Nuremberg Rallies in Germany.'"<sup>27</sup> But somehow, perhaps because of Christopher Lee's charisma, many viewers interpret the film as a sympathetic portrayal of a pagan community. The 2006 remake, on the other hand, is another wicked witch story.

Hardy's film stars Edward Woodward as British policeman Sergeant Howie, a conservative Christian. He goes to an island off the

coast of Scotland to investigate the reported disappearance of a little girl. When Howie arrives, he finds the island populated by Pagans, whose values and beliefs will be quite familiar to anyone who has practiced or studied the Old Religion. *The Wicker Man* portrays an English version of Wicca that is more male dominated than are most American covens, but the islanders' beliefs would be comfortable enough for Wiccans anywhere. Also, Sergeant Howie's conservative Christian views might seem generally unpleasant to many viewers. His first words in the film are an order barked to one of his men to get a haircut, which in 1973 would certainly have identified him as "uptight" in contemporary slang. In effect, screenwriter Shaffer establishes a binary opposition of conservative Christianity and Wicca on which the film's conflict depends, and viewers can take their choice between the two.

Howie is extremely uncomfortable with what he sees on the island. When he gets a room in the local inn, he is offended by the bawdy folk songs the locals sing in the pub and at the open promiscuity of young people on the beach. As the film progresses, Howie becomes more and more righteously offended with the values of the Pagans and more and more obsessed with finding the lost child. His moral outrage escalates when he visits Lord Summerisle, the owner of the island, who defends the Pagan way of life as best, confiding to Howie that his grandfather freed the natives for Pagan worship after purchasing the land.

As May Day (or Beltane) approaches—a special time for Wiccans—Howie concludes that the missing child is still alive and will be sacrificed for a good harvest of apples (perhaps an allusion to Genesis and the Garden). He joins the May Day procession in disguise, waiting for the moment of sacrifice. Sure enough, the girl appears, but her disappearance had been a ruse to lure Howie to the island. He is the sacrificial offering, representing the crown.<sup>28</sup> The closing scenes show Howie in a huge hollow wicker statue of a man (hence the title), along with several animals, as he is burned alive while the natives sing songs to the Sun God and the Goddess of the orchard.

A community of viewers composed of neo-pagans and those of liberal mind might well relate to Summerisle and his fun-loving nature people, unfettered by rules and problems of conscience. Another viewing community might see the occult as dangerous or subversive to Christian values, as Hardy and Shaffer intended. Most of the film has appeal for the former. In one scene, for example, Lord Summerisle, not only the owner of the island but the Pagan high priest, brings a young boy to Willow, the nubile innkeeper's daughter (Britt Ekland), for a sexual initiation in the room next door to the policeman's.

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**Christopher Lee as Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man* (1973). Image courtesy of Photofest, Inc.**

bled Pagans as his death nears, telling them, in words well suited to move just about any viewer, that they will be guilty of murder. When the policeman insists that his death will not bring back the apple crop on which the island's economy depends, Summerisle angrily insists that it will. And when Howie says that after the next crop failure the islanders will have to sacrifice Summerisle, we see a look of concern on Summerisle's face. Camera angles at this point have changed. We look down on Summerisle, and neither the lighting nor his facial expression flatters him. Howie then dies with dignity, a Christ figure, calling on God for mercy on his soul; and the shot of the happy Pagans, singing a hymn to their Sun God and swaying rhythmically, takes on an ironic tone, as the sun, the islanders' object of worship, sinks into the sea.

In 1918, Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov conducted an experiment that seems a precursor to a viewer-response methodology. He alternated close-ups of the face of an actor (Ivan Mozzhukhin), who remains expressionless, with shots of a bowl of soup, a dead woman, and a girl at play. Kuleshov then queried the audience for responses

and got varying interpretations. Some viewers thought the man was in deep mourning and some that he enjoyed watching the girl at play, while others commented on his pensiveness in ignoring the soup. In fact, Mozzhukhin's expression never changed. Kuleshov's intent was to show the power of the screen image and editing to create individual viewer response. So it goes in *The Wickerman*. The film demonstrates this power to create multiple audience reaction, depending on what viewers bring to it, through the screen image and editing. From the perspective of many, especially New Agers or Wiccans, the film gives Paganism more caché than Howie's conservative Christianity until the very end. But like *Season of the Witch*, *The Wicker Man*, despite authorial intent, looks in multiple directions. Those who share Howie's values can take comfort in his martyrdom and the dignity with which he faces death, while Pagans of all sorts and those sympathetic to New Age ideas and unsympathetic to conservative Christian values can see his death as merited and symbolic of the demise of what he represents.

But if *The Wicker Man* offers a rather ambivalent view of the Craft, not so the 2006 remake, which seems a quite explicit attack on Dianic Wicca. Directed by Neil LaBute, this version makes the Howie character from the 1973 film a California state patrolman, Edward Malus (Nicolas Cage). Malus witnesses a mother and child burned to death when a truck strikes their car after he stops them to return a doll that the child had thrown from the window. The distraught Malus then gets a letter from a former lover, Willow (Kate Beahan), begging him to come to an island off the coast of Washington to help find her daughter, who is missing.

Entranced by his memory of Willow, the love of his life, he goes to the island to find her. There he finds a society of women, who are LaBute's version of Dianic Pagans, quite the reverse of the society in the original. Many scenes from this version imitate passages from the original, but each imitation has a decidedly different spin. Willow, a winsome flower child in this version rather than the randy barmaid in the 1973 film, reveals that her daughter Rowan<sup>29</sup> has disappeared, and we later learn that Malus is the child's father. As in the original, no one on the island will admit to the child's existence. A scene in the local school reflects the similar one from the 1973 version, but here the children are all girls. When the teacher asks them what man represents in purest form, they all exclaim "Phallic symbol, phallic symbol," rather derisively. Sister Rose, the teacher, goes on to demonize men and their quixotic, violent behavior.

In another parallel scene to the original's confrontation of Howie and Summerisle, Edward confronts Sister Summersisle (Ellen Burstyn),

the community's leader, who tells Edward that the people's allegiance is with "the great Mother Goddess, who rules this island, with me as her representative." The film connects with the *Matter of Salem* when Sister Summersisle tells Edward that their "Celtic ancestors all the way back rebelled against the suppression of the feminine" and came to America. Unfortunately, they settled in Salem and were persecuted, then came to this island."

The economy of the island is beekeeping, a symbolic statement from LaBute about the feminine community. They are like a beehive, with Sister Summersisle as the queen bee. As in a bee colony, the male role is limited to breeding. When Edward asks about the island's men, she responds, "We love our men. We're just not subservient to them. They're a very important part of our island. Breeding you know." Indeed, we see few men on the island, and no young boys. The men seem mute and docile, ordered about rather rudely by the women; and in a scene late in the film, Edward falls back in horror when he sees one of them open his mouth, suggesting the man's tongue has been removed.

When the film moves to its inevitable conclusion, LaBute completes his demonizing of Dianic Wicca. The date is May 1st, Beltane. Like Howie, Edward is a sacrifice, here to the Goddess rather than the Sun God, to assure that there will not be another crop failure, as, we are told, there had been the previous year. He is necessarily male and connected to government, another filmic allusion to "the king must die" sacrifice from antiquity. As Edward dies a painful death, the women chant "The throne must die! The throne must die!" As he is dragged away, Sister Summersisle tells Edward that Willow is her daughter, and we see Sister Summersisle, Willow, and Rowan standing as maiden, mother, and crone on the front row of the group, with Summersisle wearing a triple crescent necklace signifying the Triple Goddess of Wiccan tradition.

LaBute's film no doubt creates opposing responses from differing communities of viewers. But it lacks the subtlety and nuances of the original *Wicker Man* and of *Season of the Witch*. Most important, LaBute does not create polar opposition of competing religions. Also, the "formal features" that Fish speaks of as creating response are heavy handed and obviously loaded against the feminist wing of the Old Religion.

George Romero, much better known for his zombie films, wrote and directed *Season of the Witch* (1972). Joanie Mitchell (Jan White), a suburban housewife, struggles with a midlife crisis and a sense of worthlessness. Her dominating businessman husband Jack (Bill Thunhurst) gives her a comfortable lifestyle but is rarely at home and



gives no emotional support. He even beats her when he discovers that his daughter is having an affair and that Joanie is aware of it. Moreover, Romero underscores Joanie's longing for sexual fulfillment, which her perpetually exhausted husband does not provide her.

At a social event, she learns of a woman in the community who claims to be a witch; and for a lark, she visits this person with a friend who wants a tarot reading. During the reading, we see Joanie avidly perusing a book on Wicca that she finds there. Later the witch, Marian, tells her of her beliefs and practices. "It's a religion, really. My mother was a witch and my father belonged, so it was really quite simple for me. . . . I honestly think that everyone underneath their prejudices knows there's something out there that we haven't got the power to define."

As Joanie becomes more dissatisfied with her life, she begins reading Wiccan books intensively and buying equipment for practicing magic. She casts a spell to attract Gregg (Raymond Laine), her daughter's boyfriend; and although she finally has to telephone him, Joanie believes the spell has worked when they begin an affair. Her perceived success frightens her, and she revisits her witch friend to confess she has used a spell and to express her concern. In a scene that introduces the cautionary element so conventional in occult films, Marian advises her, "It won't work, more often than not, if you use it foolishly. . . . Don't play with it. Don't use it lightly. Knowing you've abused it can destroy you from within—with fear if nothing else."

As *Season of the Witch* plays itself out, Joanie becomes more and more involved in the occult and more nervous about it. The film shows a "summoning," in which she uses Wiccan paraphernalia. The spell produces what seem to be indeterminate results. Joanie summons Virago, one of the "Lords" upon whom witches in some branches of Paganism might call. We see a cat enter the house, an appropriate symbol for the traditional view of the witch's familiar. Gregg then arrives to provide the sexual liaison Joanie desires. And when he dozes afterward, he awakens to ravish her in a scene that suggests that he has become the incarnation of Virago. The viewer is left with a choice of believing either that the summoning brought not only Gregg but Virago, who performs the Great Rite with Joanie, or that Joanie has simply deluded herself.

Whatever the reason, Joanie becomes more self-confident and more capable of dealing with her life, continuing to practice her witchcraft as what Wiccans would call a solitary. She even tells Gregg, to his chagrin, that she doesn't want to see him any more. He has served his purpose for her. But persistent dreams trouble her of a rapist wearing a gargoyle-like mask and forcing his way into her home. When her

the Old Religion sheds new light on this film, an adaptation of John Updike's novel of the same title directed by George Miller. The film version transforms the women at the story's center from the novel's selfish and morally bankrupt witches to women oppressed by a male bully. The three women who consort with the satanic Mr. Van Horne in both novel and film have "powers," and while the film version of *The Witches of Eastwick* is hardly a romance, it is definitely a woman's film, with a good bit of female bonding.

The opening scenes introduce Alexandra Medford (Cher), Jane Spofford (Susan Sarandon), and Sukie Ridgemont (Michelle Pfeiffer) as best friends and incidentally as a reflection of the Triple Goddess. We do not see much of their powers at the outset. Alexandra makes clay figurines of the squat, pregnant female figure that Wiccans would recognize as the Goddess. Then, when the long-winded principal at the school where Jane teaches music bores them beyond patience at a graduation ceremony, the women, unconsciously perhaps, summon a storm to end the affair. Sukie says, "I was praying for something to happen," and Alexandra and Jane agree. But the film does not establish them as fully cognizant of their powers at this point.

All three have lost their husbands. Jane's divorce has just become final, Alexandra is widowed, and Sukie's husband has left her with five children. They all would like to meet the right man. So they start imagining what they want and conjure one up. One wants "someone to watch over me." Another wants "Someone from out of town." Another wants someone who would listen. They conclude, "If we're gonna have it, let's have it all." And so, the film suggests, their powers bring the demonic Daryl Van Horne (Jack Nicholson) to town, self-described as "Just your average horny little Devil." The film reinforces his true identity by occasionally inserting the sound of a fly buzzing when we see him alone (another reference to Satan as the Lord of the Flies), and then showing him as a fly before he pops away to wherever such beings go when the girls do away with him at the end.

He seduces the women, one by one, and they gradually become a *ménage à quatre*. Each woman changes, Jane especially, who goes from mousy small-town schoolmarm and mediocre musician to glamorous woman and gifted performer on the viola. The four live together in the lovely old mansion that Van Horne buys and renovates. Van Horne tells Alexandra when he courts her, "I came to Eastwick because I was drawn here," clearly by these women's wish.

The film exalts the power of the feminine throughout. Sukie opines to Van Horne, "Women are more natural, right? And nature is crazy, no matter what scientists say." Van Horne answers that he'd love to

be a woman. They “can birth babies and make milk to feed them, the true magic.” Moreover, the men in the film tend to be insensitive brutes. The women complain at the beginning that men have no feelings. Jane’s school principal is a lecher who hustles her. But Van Horne turns out to be an even more brutal male.

When Daryl puts a curse on Felicia Alden, the only person other than the three witches to really recognize who he is, she becomes so obsessed and unbalanced that she drives her husband Clyde, the newspaper editor and Sukie’s boss, to kill her. As Jane, Sukie, and Alexandra watch the police take Clyde away, their strong feelings cause the sidewalk to buckle. “We make things happen,” Jane cries. And they decide to stay away from Daryl. When he calls, they refuse to have anything to do with him. Alexandra reacts appropriately from a Wiccan perspective when she tells him, “You can’t use your power to hurt people.” To do so would be the left-hand path, Daryl’s way, and the three witches want nothing to do with it.

Daryl reacts like a bully by punishing each of them, using his powers to torment them with their worst fears, putting an especially painful hex on Sukie. They decide to go back to him, but only to get rid of him. Their plan leads to a confrontation, with the three finding his book of spells and using their powers to punish him with a painful curse. It includes a powerful wind that blows him around, the scene suggestive of the first level of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, where the sensualists, a category that would certainly include Daryl, are blown about like autumn leaves. Daryl eventually lands in a church. He rails at the congregation as more malediction falls on him. The scene underscores the woman’s film theme. “Do you think God knew what he was doing when he created woman?” Daryl screams at the congregation in a male chauvinist frenzy. Woman must have been one of his mistakes, he rants. “WE [the word gets emphasis] make mistakes and they call it evil. When God makes mistakes they call it nature.”

The women portrayed in the film are only barely recognizable as the ones in the novel. Updike’s Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane are at least moderately wicked witches; and he labels them specifically as a coven, and not the only coven in Eastwick. He also uses specific references to Wiccan practices and beliefs. The three women meet weekly, and their interaction raises the “cone of power,”<sup>33</sup> which Wicans refer to as part of a coven ceremony. Sukie whispers “seven times the obscene and sacred prayer to Cernunnos”<sup>34</sup> when she wants to attract a man. And when she plays a tennis match with Daryl, she becomes the Goddess: “She was Diana, Isis, Astarte.”<sup>35</sup>

Updike did his research on Wicca. But these witches are closer to the Wicked Witch of the West than to Glinda the Good as he portrays

they excitedly whisper, "She's here! . . . Someone to be the fourth! She's the one!"

Thus, the girls accept Sarah into their coven. The film depicts them in a good many standard coven practices: casting a circle, using an athame, lighting plenty of candles (candle magic is a Wiccan tradition), and casting spells. The film's mythos differs from Dianic Wicca in that the girls' power comes from a male nature god, Meno. Nancy describes him as the pantheistic deity that most Wiccans worship: "It's the trees, it's the rocks, it's the wind, it's everything. If God and the devil were playing football, Meno could be the stadium that they played on. It would be the sun that shone down on them."

As the teen picture formula develops, the girls use their empowerment both to resolve their own problems and to punish their persecutors. In a spell-casting session, they form a circle in traditional Wiccan fashion. The leader intones to the person entering the circle, "It is better that you should rush upon this blade than enter the circle with fear in your heart. How do you enter?" and the girl entering answers, "With perfect love and perfect trust." The language of this ceremony and a later one when the girls call on the "Watchtowers" of North, South, East, and West comes directly from Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*.<sup>37</sup> They then cast spells; Bonnie asks that her scars be taken away, Sarah that Chris (the boy who had lied about her) be smitten with her, and Rochelle that Laura (a popular girl who has persecuted her) be punished. Nancy is more ambitious, and asks that all the power of Meno be taken into her.

The film shows the empowerment of four young women who are, in the teen-picture tradition, the outsiders of the school. Succeeding scenes show the four of them walking proudly and confidently through the school's halls, a far cry from the persecuted loners who had been picked on by the popular students. But it also introduces the cautionary tale theme endemic to the occult film.

The three scenes in an occult bookstore provide the Wiccan moral center. Lirio, the proprietor, articulates it. When the girls joke about "black magic," Lirio responds, "True magic is neither black nor white. It's because nature is both, loving and cruel all at the same time. The only good or bad is in the heart of the witch." When Rochelle and Bonny respond with scorn, she continues, "Then understand this. Whatever you send out you get back three times three. . . . It's a basic feature of life said in many ways in many faiths: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" Lirio's lines are yet another paraphrase from Starhawk, who writes in *The Spiral Dance*, "'What you send, returns three times over' is the saying—an ampli-

film version adds significantly to the meager Wiccan references from the novel.

Hoffman's novel portrays the story of "the Owens women," descendants of Maria Owens who immigrated to New England in the eighteenth century, following the man who fathered her child. She is clearly a strong, independent woman, who "looked you straight in the eye" and "was known to do as she pleased, without stopping to deliberate what the consequences might be."<sup>41</sup> While Hoffman suggests that she has "powers," the novel does not label Maria Owens a witch or associate her with the troubles in Salem.

The novel then segues to two hundred years later, with Jet and Frances Owens, elderly spinsters and the descendants of Maria, living in the house Maria built. They adopt their nieces Sally and Gillian when their parents are killed, raising the girls according to their lights. In the novel, Jet and Frances are the modern equivalent of the village wise women, spell casters to whom people come for help in love and other matters. Gillian grows into a stunning woman. Men cannot resist her, and after leaving home she falls in love with James Hawkins, a drug pusher with propensities for violence. Sally remains with her aunts. She marries a local boy and has two daughters. After her husband's death, she buys a house in another town and establishes a life of her own.

The complications of the novel begin when Gillian believes she has accidentally killed Hawkins by giving him nightshade to tranquilize him. She comes to Sally with the body in the car, and the two decide to bury him under a lilac bush in Sally's lawn. More complications arise when Gillian falls in love with Ben Frye, a local high school teacher. When Gary Hallett, a detective from the Arizona Attorney General's office, shows up looking for Hawkins, he falls head over heels in love with Sally, who finds herself equally attracted to him. Hoffman further complicates the plot when Hawkins's restless spirit stirs and does mischievous things around Sally's house. The aunts resolve the plot with a spell and a bucket of lye for Hawkins's body, and happy endings for the sisters soon follow.

Hoffman's *Practical Magic* is clearly targeted to a female audience. Both Frye and Hallett, the heroes, are the sensitive males favored by romance readers, with Hallett even occasionally and rather spontaneously bursting into tears. Hawkins, the villain, is the abusive male that women must dread, and he gets the punishment he deserves. The film version also seems to target a women's audience and adapts the novel's basic plot elements, but adds to the Wiccan frame.

The film adaptation also opens in seventeenth-century New England but with a very different Maria Owens from that of the novel,

a witch, about to be hanged by a group of Puritans, making the film yet another entry in the *Matter of Salem*. She foils them by using magic to make the rope break. She later has her child and loses her lover, but unlike the novel's character, she has a witch's power. "She casts a spell on herself," we are told in a voice-over, "that she would never again know the agony of love," resulting in "a curse on any man who dared love an Owens woman." Thus, the screenwriter transforms the novel's strong-willed Maria Owens into a practitioner of the Craft.

Her descendants, both the two aunts of the novel and the nieces, not only have powers, but are, as most Wiccans would recognize, kindred spirits. We get a sly reference from the aunts to covens meeting in the forest on Halloween—Samhain to Wiccans—when Sally (Sandra Bullock) makes the aunts promise not to let her daughters "dance naked in the woods." And unlike Hoffman's character, the film's Sally is also born with exceptional magical ability. We see her cast a spell as a child that eventually attracts Hallett (Aidan Quinn), but she suppresses them and tries unsuccessfully to fit in with the community. Moreover, the film conspicuously turns Sally, the aunts, and Sally's daughters into the Wiccan stages of womanhood—maiden, mother, and crone.

Sally had fallen in love with her husband because of a spell the aunts had put on them, and he dies because of the curse on men who love an Owens woman, occult elements missing in the novel. When Sally moves away from the aunts' home with her two daughters (children in the film but teenagers in the novel), she opens a shop specializing in herbals and various natural remedies. That Wiccans put great stock in the power of herbs is demonstrated by the number of books on the market giving the Old Religion's perspective on herbal medicines. Also, Jimmy Hawkins of the novel has become Jimmy Angelov (Goran Visnjic) in the film, perhaps to suggest his demonic nature (a fallen angel); and to support the aura of occult evil about him, the film identifies him as an immigrant from Transylvania with a vaguely Bela Lugosi-like accent.

The film's neo-pagan spin intensifies with the death of Angelov. In the novel, Jimmy Hawkins is already dead when Gillian (Nicole Kidman) arrives at Sally's home. The film's version is similar, but Angelov kidnaps the sisters; and in an attempt to put him to sleep, Sally doses his tequila with nightshade, which may have caused his death. Then Gillian persuades Sally to use a spell to bring him to life, one that the aunts had warned her never to use. The general tone of the spell sounds more or less Wiccan, with a pentangle on the corpse and a spell chanted to Hecate, one of the names of the Goddess in neo-

have been decapitated. When he arrives, Ichabod finds the locals terrorized by stories of a headless horseman who tracks down his victims and takes their heads. Ichabod, a child of the Enlightenment and the film's doubter character, rejects a supernatural explanation. He represents the Age of Reason, believing that "to solve crimes, to detect the guilty, we must use our brains to recognize vital clues, using up-to-date scientific technology."

Soon after he arrives in Sleepy Hollow, however, he comes face to face (so to speak) with the headless Hessian (Christopher Walken shown in flashbacks, while the character still had a head) and learns that his comfortable rationalism does not work outside the confines of the city. He is the doubter character in the occult film tradition who eventually is convinced. In the process of his confrontation with the supernatural, Ichabod begins to have dreams and flashbacks of his mother. He sees her in nature, levitating and circling. He also sees his father finding her beside the fireplace drawing a spiral (yet another allusion to the spiral dance and Starhawk). The father seizes her and points his finger to a passage in the Bible, no doubt the "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" lines, and then we see Ichabod finding his mother's dead body in an iron maiden. "My mother was an innocent," Ichabod exclaims to Katrina, "a child of nature, condemned, murdered by my father. Murdered to save her soul, by a Bible-black tyrant behind a mask of righteousness." His description of his mother and her fate matches nicely with Wiccan views of nature and patriarchal Christianity.

But Ichabod's mother is not the only witch in the film. When Ichabod arrives at the Van Tassel home in Sleepy Hollow, a party is in progress, with a blindfolded Katrina Van Tassel (Christina Ricci) playing a game of Wickety Witch and innocently kissing Ichabod. Love blooms, of course, and Katrina later gives Ichabod a book she had from her mother, who was apparently a witch, titled *A Compendium of Spells and Devices of the Spirit World*. Ichabod protests "I have no need of it," but Katrina insists that "it is a sure protection against harm." And sure enough, it turns out to be just that. Then later, Ichabod finds a pentangle (right-side up) along with occult symbols, including the all-seeing eye chalked under his bed, put there by the witchie Katrina. He thinks the worst, that it is the evil eye and that Katrina controls the horseman. But later, when the Horseman attacks the local church to try to get her father, Katrina chalks the same symbol in the floor, which prevents the Horseman's entry, and Ichabod finds it illustrated in the book as a protection for loved ones. So the film gives us two quite Wiccan witches, Ichabod's mother and Katrina, as well as Katrina's mother, who, Katrina says, had powers

but died before she knew her. They are balanced against two witches of the dark side. The two little girls who were present at the Horseman's death at the hands of colonial soldiers grow up to be evil witches. Thus, the film juxtaposes the left-hand and right-hand paths of the occult.

### MORE WITCHES IN THE CINEPLEX

Dozens of other films have extended allusions to neo-paganism and Wicca. While the Blair Witch seems a lineal descendant of the evil witch image from earlier times, the Erica Geerson character (Erica Leerhsen) announces her Wiccan beliefs in the opening footage of *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch II* (2000) and gives viewers a spirited defense of the Old Religion: "We embrace nature, not evil," she states; "We've always been misunderstood." She takes the Blair Witch tour believing Elly Kedward was a kindred spirit and village wise woman who was killed by bigots, but she lives to find out there is more than one kind of witch. The title of the 1997 film *Drawing Down the Moon* should leave viewers who are knowledgeable of Wicca in no doubt as to where the film's sympathies lie. A wandering, high-minded witch comes to an urban area and uses her powers (including formidable martial arts skills) to defeat bad guys and greedy capitalists in helping the poor and homeless. *Teen Witch* (1989) features a sixteen-year-old girl who discovers she has powers, though the film doesn't really establish her as Wiccan. In Roland Joffé's ill-fated "re-imagining" of *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), Hester Prynne's conversation with Mistress Hibbons (a historical figure hanged as a witch during the Salem trials) establishes the latter as one who follows the old ways, and her home is replete with symbols reflective of the Old Religion.

The *Harry Potter* books and the films which so reverently adapt them have been vigorously attacked by Christian conservatives as leading children toward witchcraft. Web sites attacking the books abound. For instance, *exposingsatan.org* writes: "There are many books out about Witchcraft but none so cleverly packaged like the latest. Satan is up to his old tricks again and the main focus is the children of the world. The latest craze is a series of books by author J. K. Rowling, known as Harry Potter." News stories have regularly appeared about attempts to censor the books. An Associated Press story of May 15, 2006, for instance, tells of the Gwinnett County, Georgia, school board rejecting a mother's demand that the books be taken out of a library because they "promote witchcraft" of the Satanic variety.



In fact, however, the witchcraft in the *Harry Potter* films is no more Satanic, or Wiccan, than the magic and witches portrayed in Frank Baum's many *Oz* books, which no one seems to object to. Like Baum, Rowling has established a fantasy frame that has charmed millions of children (and their parents). In Rowling's fictional world, there are those who have the potential to learn magic who are trained at Hogwart's and those who don't, and, as in films such as *Bewitched* and *Bell, Book and Candle*, the witch society lives secretly, and peacefully. But the *Harry Potter* books show no debt to Wicca as a religion.

The emergence of Wicca on the small screen is a matter for another study but deserves mention here. Elizabeth Montgomery's perky Samantha in *Bewitched* brought the good witch into American living rooms in the 1960s, though the series has no actual Wiccan allusions. More recently, *Charmed* and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (based on *Teen Witch*) allude to elements of Craft practice. Perhaps *The Worst Witch* series (based on Jill Murphy's books) and the made-for-video feature-film version (1986), all of which are for the middle-school crowd, are the most interesting. All children, especially those of Wiccans, would probably enjoy them, though beyond the occasional pentangle emblem there's no real reference to the Old Religion. The story line looks like a source for J. K. Rowling's vastly more popular *Harry Potter* novels and the film adaptations. The action takes place in a school for witches with Mildred (Fairuza Balk), the heroine, bedeviled by a girl who bullies her (the equivalent of Draco Malfoy). A teacher (played by Diana Rigg and rather like Snape) hates her for no good reason, and a benign head mistress, Miss Cackle (Charlotte Rae), seems a female version of Albus Dumbledore. There are even broomstick competitions and games similar to those at Hogwart.

But the 2001 TNT production of *Mists of Avalon* takes the portrayal of Wicca and Paganism to another level. Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel, on which the made-for-television production is based, has long been a favorite with Pagans.<sup>42</sup> Bradley reverses the traditional version of the Matter of Arthur, adapting the Wiccan monomyth to the story of Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, and the other members of this long-running cast of characters. This made-for-TV version retains Bradley's focus on Goddess worship, demonstrating once again the readiness of the mass audience to accept this level of religious diversity, but it tones down the novel's harsh portrayal of the medieval church.

One might make the case that the film industry has discovered Wicca as merely another vehicle to satisfy the public's taste for sensational stories with an occult theme. Yet *The Craft*, *Practical Magic*,

*Sleepy Hollow*, and other recent films that cast witches in a positive light demonstrate a sea change in American culture. The producers have invested in first-class production values and a glossy look with bankable performers, a level of talent absent in earlier Wiccan films. Although they include the usual caveats about occult practice, these films present a generally favorable view of witches for the mass audience.

It is easy enough, and a critical cliché, to say that the popular film mirrors society. Tudor notes that a fundamental function of culture and its products is to explore principles of morality or justice, to experience the unknown and perhaps the forbidden, and to find contact with the sacred: "Out of the rich complexity of our social lives we single out some things and call them culture. They are the collective property of a body of people. They transcend the individual though they must be articulated through him. Culture consists of people's beliefs, their ideas, their values, their very conception of reality. It is given concrete expression in the richly varied artifacts that men lovingly create."<sup>43</sup> The Wiccan film seems an especially significant cultural product. Powerful filmic affirmations of Wiccan values and strong condemnations reflect positions in our culture wars, but acceptance of films such as *Practical Magic* and *The Craft* show a growing tolerance for alternative spiritual paths in our multicultural society.

## 5

## “I see dead people”: Spiritualism in Film

WHEN HAMLET FINALLY MEETS HIS FATHER’S GHOST ON THE TOWERS of Ellsinore Castle, he cries, “Angels and Ministers of Grace Defend us! / Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned. . . / I will speak to thee.”<sup>1</sup> Old Hamlet’s ghost turns out not to be a bit of undigested beef, as Scrooge first describes Marley’s ghost in *A Christmas Carol*, but the real thing. And when Partridge, Tom’s servant in Henry Fielding’s classic eighteenth-century novel *Tom Jones*, sees the Ghost on stage at a production of *Hamlet*, he is so frightened he is unable to distinguish between art and life. When the Ghost appears, “his Knees knocked against each other” and he says “if I was frightened, I am not the only person. . . . Nay, you may call me a Coward if you will; but if that little Man there upon the Stage is not frightened, I never saw any Man frightened in my life.”<sup>2</sup> And so it goes with ghost stories. Evocations of things that go bump in the night have been the stock in trade of the tale of terror from ancient folklore to the latest gothic at the local bookstore for some good reasons.

For one thing, we must all ask the eternal question posed so plaintively in the Bible by Job’s cry, “If a man die, will he live again?” (14:14). Also, people ranging from the likes of Prince Hamlet to the humble Partridge are afraid of ghosts; and for reasons that are too complex to discover in this book, we enjoy being scared—as long as the fear is vicarious. But where do screen writers get their information about ghosts? Most of it comes from folklore and legend. Spiritualism and now the marriage of Spiritualism with the New Age, however, have been important sources for ghost films from the 1940s to the present. Scriptwriters have tapped specific Spiritualist works, but as is the case with New Age beliefs, Satanism, and Wicca, they draw on concepts that have crossed into the public consciousness.

Spiritualism traces its roots to the eighteenth century and the *illum-  
inist* tradition in Europe, which featured séances, channeling, and other activities that became de rigueur in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Also, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) claimed communication

with the dead and wrote in *Heavenly Doctrine* that "Man is so created as to live simultaneously in the natural world and in the spiritual world. Thus he has an internal and an external nature or mind; by the former living in the spiritual world, by the latter in the natural world."<sup>4</sup> Swedenborg mapped the life after death in works that seem to have later been mined by Spiritualists in the nineteenth century and their New Age influenced descendants in the late twentieth and twenty-first, though most (not all) disagree with the Swedish sage's lively belief in Hell and a power of evil.

The Fox sisters, Maggie and Kate, young women living with their parents in Hydesville, New York, had much to do with the excitement over Spiritualism at the time, gaining fame in the 1840s with revelations from the spirit world gleaned from table rapping—the rapping out of messages by a table leg, supposedly from spirit sources. According to the sisters, the spirit of Charles Haynes contacted them, telling of his murder and burial in their basement where human bones were later found. The Fox sisters became famous for their mediumship but descended to little more than public entertainers. They came to a bad end, at one point confessing to fraud but then later recanting the confession. The sisters have inspired debunkers and debunkers of the debunkers down to the present, but they certainly initiated a great outpouring of public interest in Spiritualism.

The nineteenth century was an especially fertile time in the spread of Spiritualism. The second half of the century saw the battle lines drawn between Darwinists and supporters of the Genesis version of creation. Some members of the scientific community who understood Darwin's theories and accepted them were concerned that they would produce loss of faith and create a moral vacuum that would be dangerous for the public order. Spiritualism at least suggested something tangible about the nature of life and death, and they believed it was time for science to test the validity of contact with the Other Side. So William James, a physician, and a few other devoted researchers formed the American Psychical Research Association, which joined forces with a similar British society to use scientific methods to study the phenomenon. In her fascinating book *Ghost Hunters*, Deborah Blum uses journals and letters from James and other members detailing the American and British Psychical Research Association's efforts to find genuine mediums. They believed it was unscientific to simply dismiss a phenomenon without applying scientific study, and, as James wrote, "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough to prove one single crow to be white."<sup>5</sup>

Daniel Dunglas Home and many others established the role of me-

diumship prized by modern Spiritualists in England and the United States in the nineteenth century. Prominent people attended séances; some came for the entertainment value, and some were believers. Popular poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a true devotee of Spiritualism, especially of Home, inspiring her skeptical husband and fellow poet Robert Browning to pen the more than 12,200-word satirical poem "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" in which he skewers Home as a fake. James and his colleagues at both the British and American Psychological Research Society, however, tested Home's abilities with what seem to be rigorous scientific methods. Not only did they find many of his psychic responses to be accurate, but they could find no dishonesty. Despite a very few mediums who seemed to have some kind of genuine ability, they easily unmasked the vast majority as fakes. But even the obvious imposters drew crowds, and an enormous literature of Spiritualism bloomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle thought the game was afoot when it came to contacts with the Other Side, and his book *The History of Spritualism* is still a basic text for those of this persuasion.

Interest in Spiritualism peaked in the early twentieth century when the millions of deaths from World War I and the influenza epidemic led the bereaved to seek news of their loved ones in the afterlife. Though the number of followers has declined sharply since then, Spiritualism exists today as an organized religion with three organizations, two national and one international: The National Spiritualist Association of Churches; The National Spiritualist Alliance; and the International Spiritualist Federation. Most major cities have at least one Spiritualist church. Services I have attended include one common event: a reading by mediums for everyone in attendance. Most mediums say they get their information from a spirit guide or from the spirits of the loved ones of those in attendance. One occasionally sees a trance medium, whose body is said to be taken over by a spirit or spirit guide. In this case, the medium's voice and body language change, Spiritualists say, to reflect the spirit who inhabits his or her body. Others use spirit writing or automatic writing, in which the spirit or guide is said to send messages in handwriting through the medium.

Otherwise, the services may differ a great deal. In the NSA churches I have attended, participants sing hymns that are classics of traditional church music, chosen from those that support Spiritualist concepts of the afterlife. Preliminary music, however, is as likely to be from Simon and Garfunkel as "Amazing Grace." Most have a pastor, and the service usually includes some sort of homily. Some are essentially Christian, with Christ viewed as the greatest medium. After all, they say, he raised the dead. Some avoid all Christian refer-

who comes back from death in the flesh, however chilly it might be, and has acrobatic sex with the sons of one of her killers, is well outside the Spiritualist purview. This tale of a ghostly lover, one of the standard folktales about spirits, simply entertains the audience with vicarious thrills. Also, when Spiritualist elements do provide the frame for films, the sensational incidents are usually an extrapolation of the potential offered by Spiritualist beliefs rather than those that Spiritualists might believe possible.

“I JUST NEEDED TO DO A COUPLE OF THINGS”: GHOSTS WITH A MISSION: *SUPERNATURAL*, *THE UNINVITED*, *A GUY NAMED JOE*, *ALWAYS*, *GHOST*, *DRAGONFLY*, *A RUMOR OF ANGELS*, AND *THE CHANGELING*

Spiritualism, then, offers a richly sensational topic for film plots, and *Supernatural* (1933) is an early adaptation of the medium character. But here, the medium is a fraud, an example of Robert Browning’s “Mr. Sludge,” out to fleece Roma Courtney (Carole Lombard) by persuading her that the spirit of her recently deceased brother has contacted him. The film reveals the false medium’s tricks, with image projection, recorded voices, and wires to simulate floating objects. Daniel Dunglas Home, in fact, bemoaned the tricks of just such fakes.<sup>6</sup>

But despite the trickery, the film affirms life after death. Roma’s friend Dr. Houston (H. B. Warner) has a theory that the spirit of certain criminals can transmigrate and cause others to become criminals. “Perhaps their will [the possessed persons’] has been subdued,” he says. “Perhaps they have been possessed by another personality, a powerful malignant personality, without, well, without a body of its own.” He follows with a discussion of his plan to suppress convicted multiple murderer Ruth Rogen’s (Vivienne Osborne) ability to possess another person after her execution, but in a plot that mixes the machinations of a fake medium and phony séances with genuine spirit visitations, Rogens does manage to take over Roma. In a burst of poetic justice, the film has her spirit bring about the death of the false medium, who had been her lover and had left her. Meanwhile, the benign face of Roma’s brother occasionally appears on screen, watching over his sister in spirit. So the film manages both to debunk Spiritualist mediums and affirm the supernatural with spirits who remain behind, one to get revenge, the other to look out for a loved one.

The ghost-with-a-mission plot is most common in Spiritualist-influenced ghost films. The pre New Age 1943 film *The Uninvited*

offers an early example of this plot as an adaptation of Spiritualism, not yet mingled with New Age concepts. Based on the novel by Dorothy Macardle, the film gives us the problems of brother and sister Roderick and Pamela Fitzgerald (Ray Milland and Ruth Hussey), who buy a lovely old house overlooking the sea on the Welsh coast, not knowing what we eventually learn—that it already has inhabitants: not one, but two ghosts, one of them apparently the mother of a young girl, Stella Meredith (played in a first appearance by a luminous young Gail Russell), who lives nearby. Rick and Pamela discover that at least one of these not-so-blithe spirits wants the lovely Stella dead, either the ghost of the woman who was supposedly her mother or the Spanish Gypsy woman who had modeled for Stella's artist father. Clearly, the house is haunted. The temperature suddenly turns cold, Rick and Pamela hear unearthly wailing, and flowers suddenly wilt. All of this, of course, is the stuff of early Spiritualist lore.

So they must find a way to stop the ghosts. Pamela suggests a séance, another allusion to Spiritualism, apparently to reassure Stella. It is an unusual approach, Pamela, Rick, Stella, and their friend Dr. Scott without a medium. They arrange letters in a circle on a table to make something like a ouija board and use a glass as a planchette, but it turns up the spirits in question, to the accompaniment of glasses rattling, a smell of mimosa, and Stella, possessed by a spirit, speaking in a Spanish Gypsy dialect. Spiritualists routinely report smells associated with the deceased during séances, and Stella's speaking in the Gypsy dialect is an example of the trance medium, possessed by a spirit, speaking in an unknown tongue. Rick and Pamela eventually save Stella from the evil ghost.

*The Uninvited* adapts types of communication with earthbound spirits similar to Spiritualists' beliefs during the early days of the movement. New Age writers continue the line of thinking on why some souls choose to remain behind. Most souls, they opine, enter the light, where they meet departed loved ones, then travel through a tunnel to the Other Side. Raymond Moody's books on near-death experiences have contributed to making this imagery, or parts of it, stock footage for death scenes. Some who die, however, stay behind, say New Age Spiritualist authors. George Anderson writes, "Sometimes, a soul will linger temporarily on the earth if some issues of their lifetime have not been completely resolved, or they might visit regularly if there is a particular affinity for a loved one or location."<sup>7</sup>

*A Guy Named Joe* (1944)<sup>8</sup> also precedes the New Age but offers another instance of a spirit's attachment to the material plane and a loved one and is probably the first example of spirit guides in film. Instead of this spirit voluntarily remaining behind, Joe is sent back to

help others. But he must achieve detachment from the earthly realm, and his attachment focuses on the most common and popular subject for film plots—love. As is often the case in films about angels and spirit guides, the conflict *A Guy Named Joe* explores is the love of the departed soul for someone left behind. As in films that focus on the love of angels for humans, the love story's conflict spins off the different levels of being of the ghost and the human.

In the film, Major Pete Sandidge (Spencer Tracy) is a B-25 bomber pilot stationed in England who carries on a buddy/lover relationship with Dorinda Durston (Irene Dunne), who ferries planes from the United States. Pete's recklessness under fire is legendary, and Dorinda tries to get him to accept a transfer to the States for a pilot training position before he gets killed. Although he finally accepts, he takes one last mission and dies while attacking a German aircraft carrier (a craft never actually used by the German navy).

When he arrives in a Heaven decked out with plenty of studio fog, Pete is sent back to earth to help other pilots. The General, the heavenly officer in charge (played by the venerable Lionel Barrymore), tells him, "You were helped by every man since the beginning of time who dreamed of wearing wings. . . . Now it's your turn to pass it on to the next man." The problem is that Captain Ted Randall (Van Johnson), the man he's assigned to help, falls in love with Dorinda. Pete wants Dorinda to stay in love with him, and he can't give her up. Thus, the conflict, as is often the case in films about angels and spirit guides, goes back to Genesis, with the Gregori, beings from another reality, in love with those in this plane. Clearly, Joe has become a spirit guide and must achieve detachment, an issue stated more explicitly in the 1990 remake of the film, *Always* directed by Stephen Spielberg.

Dalton Trumbo's script for *A Guy Named Joe* was too good not to inspire a remake. The plot line for *Always* is about the same, with B-26s for dumping chemicals on forest fires instead of B-25s dropping bombs. Director Spielberg gives us a sly hint when one of the fliers who lands on the field says, "What this place reminds me of is World War II." In this film, the daredevil Pete (Richard Dreyfuss) is a smoke-eating pilot who fights forest fires, and the film's message reflects Spiritualist ideas as modified by the New Age. As in *A Guy Named Joe*, Pete dies heroically.

But instead of arriving in a foggy Heaven, he strolls through the burned-out forest where he had fought the fire and arrives in a green glade where he meets Hap, played by Audrey Hepburn, clearly a wise one from the Spiritualist and New Age traditions, a superior spirit guide. She gives him a lecture on his new role as guide (and for some



plot. Also, most of the films she mentions seem targeted toward a female audience, which may find satisfaction in seeing the transformation of a character into a sensitive male.

*Dragonfly* (2002) also features messages from beyond from a spirit with a mission. Dr. Emily Darrow (Susanna Thompson), wife of Dr. Joe Darrow (Kevin Costner), goes to South America as a medical volunteer and is killed while on a bus with children, fleeing from revolutionary fighting. A landslide pushes the vehicle over a cliff and into a river. She was pregnant, and Joe is devastated when the reports of her death reach him. He has no religious faith, making him the doubter for the film. He rejects treating a woman who has attempted suicide because she spurns life and wants to go to “a better place.” He snarls at her, “Let me tell you about that better place. You’d better be damned sure it’s there because crappy as this place is, it’s all there is.” Friends he meets in a bar recite lines from the poem “Rachel in Heaven”: “And on her footfall, in the rustle of leaves, her whisper in the wind, she speaks from a place beyond mortal pain.” Joe angrily answers, “You know, I don’t know why we try to save them if they have such a wonderful place to go, like ‘Rachel in Heaven.’” Thus, through most of the film, Joe is an extreme version of the doubter.

Then he starts getting flashes, all of which reflect New Age Spiritualist concepts. A child he has never met who flatlines at the hospital calls out to him, though unconscious. The boy, Jeffrey, regularly flatlines and his mother says, “He’ll come out of there with all kinds of stories about who he met in the tunnel and what they said.” Jeffrey’s stories are standard NDE lore. He draws a strange sort of squiggly cross that he says he saw in one of his near-death experiences. Also, he knows Joe because, he says, he saw him while he was dead. “I looked down, from the ceiling. That’s where I saw you.” He tells Joe that he saw Emily “inside the rainbow, the mist. I was falling through it until she caught me. . . . She flew me out so I could come back and tell somebody something.” But he can’t remember what.

Joe sees drawings on another boy’s wall similar to those Jeffrey gave him. The boy tells Joe, “She said you should go there, the lady, the lady in the picture down the hall. She said you’d be coming to see me.” The boy had seen Emily’s picture in the hospital. “She showed me your face . . . in my mind. She said I have to come back and tell you to go there—to the Rainbow.” Other supernatural messages abound. He sees dragonflies, a sort of totem for Emily, trying to get in his house. His parrot calls out, “Honey, I’m Home,” as it did when Emily walked in the door. Then the squiggly lines show up on a steamed window and in the dirt from a broken flowerpot.

Joe goes to see Sister Madeline, who had been fired as a nurse from

with joy. There is no horror in death," lines taken directly from Boylan's book.

Eventually, Mary, the stepmom, who is well intentioned but too unassertive, finds the diary Maddy had given Jimmy in which she had recorded the dead son's messages. When Mary shows it to Nathan, Jimmy's father, he refuses to let the boy visit his friend any more. Nathan and Mary, then, become the doubter characters for the occult film plot. Maddy recants on her stories, but Jimmy wants to believe. When she has a heart attack, Jimmy stays with her and cares for her until she peacefully dies. He waits for a message and finally gets one in code from the lighthouse: "James. Don't grieve. Grief is remorse for things undone. I'm closer to you now than I've ever been. The ties of love continue. I will always be with you. Speak with me as if you could see my face. I've reached a river of surpassing beauty. I'm running down to the water as we used to run to the ocean. . . . It may be that this is our point of egress."

Most of the messages from the film come almost directly from Boylan's book, as is the case in the following Morse code message Maddy records from her son: "Mother, I'm alive and loving you. My body is with thousands of other mothers' boys near Saigon. Get this fact to others if you can. It's awful for us when you grieve and we can't tell you we're all right. The capacity for believing is enlarged tremendously by experience. If you could only fix in your mind that I am not a ghost but a being, just as much as I ever was." The only difference from the passage in *Thy Son Liveth* is the reference to Saigon, updating the film from World War I to the post-Vietnam era.

Since *Rumor of Angels* is based on a book from the early twentieth century, Boylan's messages and Maddy's in the film through Morse code and lighthouse are decidedly low tech, not strictly speaking EVP, as there is no voice heard. *The Changeling* (1980), however, uses an early example of EVP research with tape and television as frame for a ghost-with-a-mission story. Like Hamlet's father, this vengeful ghost calls upon John Russell (George C. Scott), our hero, for vengeance. But in this case it is the murder of a son by a father rather than fratricide.

Russell has lost his wife and daughter in a random traffic accident. A well-known composer, he moves to Washington State to take a university teaching position. At a reception, he meets Claire Norman (Trish Van Devere) of the local historical society, who rents him a mansion that the society owns, the Chessman House, which just happens to be haunted, he discovers. More bumps in the night occur than he can deal with, and he consults the Department of Psychic Investi-

gation at the university. The department chair suggests a medium, telling him, “99% are frauds. But the one percent—astonishing!”

So a team of mediums comes to Chessman House for what is obviously a Spiritualist séance. Going into trance, one of the mediums tells John, “You’ve suffered a cruel loss, John Russell. You’ve lost a wife and child. The presence in this house is reaching out to you through that loss. . . . It is a child’s presence, a child who is not at peace, who cannot rest.” Then the medium begins automatic writing, and gets the words “Joseph” for the name of the spirit, and “help, help, help!”

John had taped the session, and when he later listens to it, in the “white noise” sections between segments of voice, he hears the child’s voice in EVP, repeating the words “Father,” “the well,” “ranch,” “Sacred Heart,” and “my medal.” All this sets up a detective yarn joined to the ghost story, as we gradually learn that in 1906, Richard Carmichael has murdered his sickly son because he might not live to be twenty-one. If the boy does not reach the age of majority, the huge fortune left to him by his maternal grandfather, which Carmichael controlled, would revert to charity, so he substitutes a changeling: hence the title of the film. It is the child murdered at the turn of the century who tries to communicate. Things get out of hand in the plot with the spirit doing psychokinetic feats that are for horror film effects and in no way part of the Spiritualist tradition; but *The Changeling* is an effective thriller and an early use of EVP as well as other Spiritualist material as frame.

The plot of *White Noise* (2005) spins directly off EVP research. In the film, Jonathan Rivers (Michael Keaton), a successful architect, loses his wife, Anna (Chandra West), in what seems to have been an accident, though her body is not found for weeks. But during the time before he knows she is dead, he experiences a variety of spooky events, almost all connected with electrical appliances. His radio turns itself on at 2:30 a.m. which we later learn was the time she died; and he gets cell phone calls with the screen on his phone reading “Anna’s cell,” though there’s no one on the line. Spiritualists accept as given that spirits are comprised of electrical energy and can manifest through electronic devices, and the Butlers describe various incidents of reported telephone calls from the Other Side.<sup>17</sup>

Raymond Price (Ian McNeice) contacts Jonathan, telling him that he’s getting EVP messages from Anna on the white noise of audiotape. At this point, Jonathan serves as the doubter. He has to be convinced, and when his loneliness and depression over his wife’s loss drive him to investigate Price’s claim, he becomes a true believer, for he hears Anna’s voice on tape, of course fragmented and barely detectable. So the remainder of the film has John obsessively trying to

contact Anna with EVP tape and video. Anna is trying to tell him something. But what is it? Therein lies the conflict for the film, of course. Three shadowy figures intermittently appear, the malevolent spirits common to films with Spiritualist themes.

Evil is too prevalent in human experience to ignore, and though most Spiritualists deny the existence of a Devil, many acknowledge wicked entities. Conan Doyle writes, "such spirits would seem to be a constant menace to mankind, for if the protective aura of the individual should be in any way defective, they may become parasitic, establishing themselves within it and influencing the action of their host."<sup>18</sup> In *Seat of the Soul*, New Age writer Gary Zukav states some common wisdom among New Age Spiritualists that dates to Spiritualism's earliest days: "In some instances, a soul holds on to a personality because that personality was particularly successful or powerful in its lifetime,"<sup>19</sup> rejecting the next stage of its spiritual evolution through reincarnation; and, Zukav asserts, we refer to these souls as ghosts or evil spirits. "These spirits choose to remain Earthbound, within the Earth's auric field. Are they evil? They are negative, yes, but evil is another issue. Do they encourage negativity? Yes, but that is part of the law of attraction; their own energy is drawn to like forces of energy, or like forces of weakness."<sup>20</sup> So it goes with the malevolent spirits in *White Noise*. As Price tells Jonathan in the film, "We have some very bad people out there. They can't all be nice. They can't all be Anna."

We eventually learn that these evil entities have possessed one of John's co-workers in a manner much like that described by Doyle. Anna's spirit, then, is the "ghost with a mission" in the tradition of the Spiritualist film. The co-worker had tortured and killed Anna, and he is currently torturing another abducted woman. Anna contacts Jonathan through EVP to prevent another murder and catch her killer.

*White Noise* has most of the elements of New Age Spiritualism ghost movies. It offers a strong cautionary tale element. Price is murdered by the three wicked spirits, and Jonathan's friend Sarah (played by the wonderfully spooky looking Deborah Kara Unger) nearly loses her life when they find her. A medium whom John contacts at one point sums up the cautionary tale element and provides the lecture on Spiritualism: "EVPs are not good. You must understand. We spend years developing a relationship with our guides so that we can protect you. It is one thing to contact the dead, and it's another thing to meddle, and you are meddling!"

The Butlers were consultants for *White Noise*, and in an e-mail, they say that the opening segments in which John uses audiotape

white noise to receive messages is an appropriate adaptation of EVP. During the film, however, the Keaton character “uses a video recorder to record the output of a computer program that generated audio and video white noise, and then played that recording into a television set.” They say that EVP experimenters have used this technique only very rarely. They also offer a caveat for the words on screen at the end of the film: “One in 12 messages is threatening.” The Butlers call this line pure fiction. But they do offer a comment about evil entities that echoes Conan Doyle: “It is not very much of a leap in logic to think that, say, a man who was a serial killer in life, might find a person still in the flesh who is gullible enough and willing to carry out his bidding” after death. But they add a caveat: “Such negativity is very difficult to sustain on the other side. It is like trying to keep an area of absolute zero temperature. Heat is always trying to sneak in.”

“REVENGE HIS FOUL AND MOST UNNATURAL MURDER”:  
VENGEFUL GHOSTS IN FILM: *A STIR OF ECHOES*, AND *GOTHIKA*.

The most successful ghost movies involve the revenge plot. So it goes, after all, in *Hamlet*. Old Hamlet is a ghost “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night” while he is purged by fire of his sins during the day, and he asks his son to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,” a “murder most foul” (1.5., 25–27). The revenge plot has set off bells in audience psyches from the beginnings of literature, and it should be no surprise that it works so well in the ghost film.

*A Stir of Echoes* (1999—released shortly after *Sixth Sense*, a film with a very similar plot) follows *Hamlet*’s vengeful spirit theme. Tom Witzke (Kevin Bacon) is a telephone lineman with a wife, Maggie (Kathryn Erbe), and son, Jake (Zachary David Cope). He also has an early midlife crisis, obsessed with a sense of being ordinary and wanting to be something special. In a nice bit of irony, the film makes him far more special than he ever wanted to be. When Tom scoffs at his flakey New Age sister-in-law Shiela for taking lessons in hypnotism, she hypnotizes him, commanding him to open up to everything. The film frames the Spiritualist plot with a bit of fiction when Shiela tells Maggie: “Therapists do it all the time. It [hypnotism] releases repressed memories, latent abilities, whatever you got back there.” Up to that point, Tom is the doubter, pooh-poohing Shiela’s ideas. Now he is a reluctant medium, “opened up” and connected to Samantha, a ghost who obviously wants something from him. As the plot moves

on, we learn that Tom's young son Jake is an even more powerful medium, which might account for the latent ability in Tom.

Samantha's spirit persecutes Tom. She appears in flashes, including EVP on the white noise of the TV; but Tom can't get the message. We get more of the Spiritualist frame from Neil, a policeman whom Maggie and Jake meet as they are on a walk. The cop is a psychic, it turns out, and immediately recognizes Jake as similarly gifted. Neil says, "The boy's got the eye on him, doesn't he—X-ray." He looks closely at Maggie and says, "Not you, though. Possibly the Daddy?" He gives her his card and tells her to send Tom to see him.

As Tom becomes more obsessive in trying to get Samantha's message, Maggie goes to see Neil. She finds him at a meeting, apparently Spiritualists or other occultists of some stripe. She tells him about Tom, and Neil fills out the plot frame with the lecture common to Spiritualist films, saying: "It comes and it goes. Some people have it for five minutes. Some for their whole lives. He's a receiver now. He can't stop it. He can't slow it down." He goes on to tell her that the ghost is telling Tom to do something. When Maggie responds that Tom doesn't know what it is, he replies, "Maybe he wasn't listening. She's asked for something and now she's getting more and more pissed off that he's not doing it. If he doesn't do her thing, she'll never go away."

And so it goes, with a good deal of sensationalism and exaggeration of Spiritualist ideas, working to a grand finale in which we learn what had happened to Samantha and in which she gets more than her pound of flesh. All this is mixed with standard ghost lore—cold when the ghost is present, electrical appliances reacting, lights blowing out, and EVP from the TV. Just about any Spiritualist would affirm that spirits can create manifestations, especially electrical ones, and can turn the environment cold, but *A Stir of Echoes* obviously exaggerates the possible effects Spiritualists might describe. At the end, however, we see Samantha's spirit looking happy, putting on her coat, and moving away for her trip to the Other Side. The film ends with some folk music that sums up the New Age Spiritualist view on earth-bound ghosts:

If I ever feel the light again, shining down on me  
I don't have to tell you how welcome it will be.  
I felt the light before, but I let it slip away  
I just keep on believing that it'll come back some day.

*Gothika* (2003) blends gothic cliché setting and a little bit of Spiritualism in another vengeful ghost plot. Dr. Miranda Grey (Halle

Berry) is a respected psychiatrist working under her husband, Douglas (Charles Dutton), who is director of Woodward Psychiatric Penitentiary. On the way home on the dark and stormy night endemic to gothic fiction and horror films, Miranda sees a mysterious girl on the road. After she swerves to miss what proves to be a ghost, she gets out of the car and approaches the apparition.

Then the scene cuts to Miranda in an isolation cell in Woodward, being treated by her fellow psychiatrist, Dr. Pete Graham (Robert Downey, Jr.), who breaks the news to her that she has murdered her husband. She remembers nothing. But the rest of the film follows her gradual recovery of memory that she actually *did* kill Doug and her discovery that she is being haunted by the ghost of Rachel Parsons, the young daughter of a colleague. Authorities assumed Rachel had committed suicide by drowning. Finally, Miranda has a vision of the flame from the girl entering her body. Miranda had been possessed, an extrapolation and a rather extreme exaggeration of the Spiritualist trance medium concept. She remains the conventional doubter for the occult film who has to be led to believe. But finally, she tells her friend and former colleague, an even more convinced doubter, "I'm not deluded, Pete, I'm possessed." "I don't believe in ghosts," he replies. "Neither do I, but they believe in me," Miranda insists. In her cell, with the lights coming off and on because of the spirit's influence with electricity, Miranda feels a ghostly presence and cries out, "I don't believe in the paranormal, and I don't believe in ghosts. But if you are the ghost of Rachel Parsons, can you let me out of the cell?" The lock clicks open, and as she wanders the corridors she sees her former patient Chloe being raped by a man with a tattoo, a scene that turns out to be the archetypal *anima sole*, or "woman in chains" image.

The film devolves into what its title suggests, gothic horror/melodrama, as the vengeful girl ghost becomes more angry and proactive in helping Miranda escape to find her killer and to find out why Miranda in her possessed state had killed her husband. The hospital looks like a gothic castle. The heroine roams deserted corridors, as lights blink on and off; there's a secret passage of sorts; pathetic fallacy (as in the constant thunder and rain) rules throughout; and the heroine, dressed fetchingly in a frequently wet T-shirt, screams enough to satisfy Fay Wray fans. Justice eventually prevails, though any semblance of Spiritualist findings disappear until the closing scene. Miranda says she's closed the psychic door and thrown away the key but then sees the ghost of a child beckoning, and camera cuts to a poster of the boy as missing. From a Spiritualist perspective, she, like Tom in *A Stir of Echoes*, has been opened up to mediumship.

friend"). According to the story, those who watch a horrifying video will immediately receive a telephone call telling them they will die in exactly seven days, and sure enough, they do. The story inspires much giggling, but we find that Tomoko has actually seen it and is really terrified. Then she dies with an expression of terror on her face, as do all those who have seen the video.

So the opening establishes the first element of the frame for all the Japanese *Ringu* and American *Ring* films. Those who watch the evil video are cursed to die within seven days. We learn the second element of the frame at the end of the film. In *Ringu*, Reiko Asakawa (Nanako Matsushima), Tomoko's aunt, is a reporter, and she learns that three other teens died at the same moment, all with the same expression of horror on their faces. Reiko sleuths her way to a cabin where the four teens had spent an overnigher and there finds the video, which she watches. She sees, among other things, short scenes of a woman's image in a mirror, a man with his head covered by a towel, an eye with the Japanese character for "sada" superimposed on it and, most portentously, an old well. Then she gets the telephone call. Terrified, she takes the video to her ex-husband, Ryuji Takayama (Hiroyuki Sanada), a university professor, who also watches it. Then their child, Yoichi, a boy who looks to be about six or seven, turns on the TV at Reiko's home and accidentally sees the video. Now the couple is in a race to save their own lives and their son's. They learn that all the deaths result from Sadako, the evil ghost child.<sup>25</sup> The plot is murky at best, and the story changes as the series branched out into sequels.

Why doesn't Reiko die after seeing the video? She was spared. Will her son be spared? In a final scene that defines the second part of the frame, she discovers the answer to her questions. "I heard that there is a way to lift the curse from the video. You have to copy it and show it to someone else within a week. . . . They have to do the same within a week." So she's off to get someone else (her father, it turns out) to view the video to save her son, which, as we discover in *Ring II*, she succeeds in doing. But the final lines set an important element of the plot frame for the following films.

The *Ringu* films are indeed ghost movies, and they adapt some of the same concepts about the spirit world that are common to Spiritualism. Perhaps the Japanese and American perspectives on the spirit world are a case of parallel cultural evolution. Spiritualists might say that the Japanese have observed the same phenomena that they have recorded. Or perhaps the world culture has spread Spiritualist ideas to Japan. Whatever the case, the films' plots spin off of several Spiritualist concepts. The evil video is certainly an example of EVP. The opening shots establish the EVP theme with a shot of a television



screen with white noise. Blank screens with white noise recur in the film, then the terrifying images. Where does the video come from? "It's not from this world. It's Sadako's wrath. She's put a curse on us," opines Yamamura. The plot certainly extrapolates on and exaggerates EVP for sensationalism, rather than adhering to actual Spiritualist findings. Having Sadako actually crawl out of the set is an extreme stretch, perhaps a visual allusion to Carol Ann being pulled into the Other Side by messages from the television in *Poltergeist*. But the premise that the electronic media can be a conduit to the Other Side is consistent with Spiritualist thought.

In the chronological order of release in the *Ringu* series, *Rasen* was released in 1998 and was to serve as a second installment. But the film's muddled and incoherent plot doomed it to failure, with Sadako killing through a virus of some kind then being reborn through DNA technology that is somehow threatening the world at the fade. *Rasen* (which translates as "The Spiral") adds little to the frame or to the Spiritualist concepts.

Nakata tried again for a sequel with *Ringu II* in 1999. New information abounds. In an opening sequence, Yamamura, the old man from the first version, talks to the doctor who did Sadako's autopsy. The doctor tells Yamamura that Sadako had somehow been alive for all but two or three years of the thirty years she had been in the well. The scene then cuts to a video white noise channel, reminding us of the EVP premises of the film, and with two girls telling the urban legend frame once again. *Ringu II* has Mai Takano (Miki Nakatani), Ryuji's teaching assistant who had been in love with him, trying to find out what had happened to Reiko and Yoichi. She eventually finds them, and the film then focuses on Yoichi's gradual possession by the evil little girl's spirit.

Then came *Ringu 0* (2000), a prequel set thirty years before the incidents portrayed in *Ringu*, and we learn that there were two Sadakos, one an evil spirit child who is somehow connected to a grown-up Sadako, an actress with a drama troupe. Dr. Ikuma, still alive, tells the heroine, Cakiko Miyaji, another reporter, that at some point the two split—a pretty obvious Freudian super ego/id allusion, and the wicked Sadako possesses her sister from time to time, causing death and destruction without the good Sadako's knowledge. All this leads to an apocalyptic conclusion with Sadako killing wholesale.

Both *Ringu II* and *Ringu 0* allude to a possibility that Spiritualists might find interesting. In *Ringu II* Mai visits Masami, the girl who was with Tokomo, the first of Sadako's victims in *Ringu II*. Masami is in a mental hospital, traumatized by her experience. At the hospital, Mai meets Dr. Kawajiri, who is interested in psychic research. When

he takes pictures of Masami, they show a strange, cloudy light around the girl. "It's called spirit photography, something in a person's mind affects the light on the film." He also, however, gets the Japanese character "Sada" imprinted on the film. Spiritualists claim that spirits can show up on film, and now, of course, on television tape in EVP sessions. Spirit photography<sup>26</sup> has long been a staple of Spiritualist research.

But how does Sadako get images on videotape for her curse? Both *Ringu II* and *Ringu 0* offer psychic/Spiritualist explanations. Sadako's mother was a powerful psychic, we learn as the series progresses, and Sadako had inherited her gift. In *Ringu II*, Dr. Kawajiri explains Dr. Ikuma's theory. "Energy of thought itself," he says, "could take physical form, appear on video tape, last thirty years in a well, thirty years of concentrated thought seeking revenge." The same explanation comes up in *Ring 0*. "Dr. Ikuma claimed intention could become a living thing, that human thought could change to energy." Thus, as her malevolence grew, Sadako used her psychic power to put images and her curse on the videotape. The concept seems yet another parallel to Spiritualism. The soul is composed of energy, Spiritualists believe. Therefore, energy might work physical acts, especially to electronic media.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, however, in these films, bad things come of television. It attacks children and disrupts the family. *Poltergeist* and *The Exorcist* develop the same theme. Hills suggests that "there is a cultural homology operating here between Japanese and western fears of technologised society, such that cultural differences may become less significant than shared, transnational anxieties over media distortions and corruptions of 'the real.'"<sup>28</sup>

*The Ring* (2002) and *The Ring II* (2005), the American versions of *Ringu* and *Ringu II*, build on the Japanese frame with many of the same warnings about technology, but even though Spiritualism began as a western phenomenon, we find far less Spiritualist allusion in this Hollywood version.<sup>29</sup> The plot of *The Ring* is essentially similar to that of *Ringu*, beginning with the urban legend motif. Sadako has become Samara Morgan (Daveigh Chase), who was not born from a psychic but still has a hair problem, and the single-mom reporter is Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts). The threatened child, Yoichi, has become Rachel's son Aidan (David Dorfman). Samara's background is changed, as we learn in *Ring II* that she was born to a teenager who had given birth in a Catholic institution of some sort, which Rachel visits as she tries to save her son. She asks the nun who had known the mother who the father was. "There was none," she is told. "She believed that some *thing* had come for her baby from the waters of the world beyond this one." The Japanese versions hint at demonic

at the television screen, with no picture, only white noise, saying to it "Hello! What do you look like? Talk loud. I can't hear you," and then beginning to murmur in agreement to whatever she hears. The scene is obviously an early reference to EVP, as the spirit world makes connection through the television. But in addition to the EVP theme, *Poltergeist*, like the *Ringu* and *Ring* films, seems a sort of moral lesson on the dangers of television.

The film plays on all the childhood fears: the grotesque old tree outside the children's room that looks like a monster at night; the grinning clown doll that leers evilly in the dark; the monsters in the closet and under the bed. Bouts of poltergeist activity begin—objects moving unexplainably and lights flashing on and off. Things get really bad when, during a loud thunderstorm and downpour, the monster in the closet sucks Carol Anne in, and she disappears. The remainder of the film focuses on getting her back from the spirit world.

The Freelings seek help from Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight), a parapsychologist, and her two assistants. Things get stranger with objects floating and roars emanating from the room, and even a series of dots of light and lots of ectoplasm, which Conan Doyle defines as "a viscous, gelatinous substance which appeared to differ from every known form of matter in that it could solidify and be used for material purposes, and yet could be re-absorbed, leaving absolutely no trace even upon the cloth which it had traversed in leaving the body."<sup>34</sup> Spiritualist literature has made the word and concept part of the popular imagination. No one dares enter Carol Anne's room. During a long night, Dr. Lesh explains the phenomenon of ghosts to young Robbie in the first of two lectures explaining the Spiritualist frame:

Some people believe that when you die, your soul goes up to heaven. . . . Some people believe that when people die there's a wonderful light, as bright as the sun, but it doesn't hurt to look into it. All the answers to all the questions that you ever wanted to know are inside that light, and when you walk to it, you become part of it forever. And then some people die but they don't know they've gone. . . . Maybe they didn't want to die. Maybe they weren't ready. Maybe they hadn't yet lived fully, or maybe they'd lived a long time but they still wanted more life. They resist going into that light, no matter how much the light wants them. They just hang around, watch TV, watch their friends grow up, feeling unhappy and jealous, and those feelings are bad. They hurt. And then, some people just get lost on the way to the light, and they need someone to guide them to it.

The lines could have been taken directly from any number of New Age Spiritualist books, and many mediums tell of their attempts to lead spirits to the light.<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Lesh recognizes that she is out of her league, so she calls on a medium, Tangina (Zelda Rubinstein), a diminutive woman with strong psychic talent. Tangina recognizes that Carol Anne suffers from “bi-location,” being in the spirit world but not of it. We then get another lecture from her. “There is no death. It is only a transition to a different sphere of consciousness. Carol Anne is not like those she is with. She is a living presence in their spiritual earth-bound plane.” Ghosts, she says, are attracted to her strong life force. “It gives them what they desire. . . . It gives off its own illumination. It is a light that gives off ample life and memories of love and home and earthly pleasures, something they desperately desire but can’t have anymore.” Carol Anne distracts them from the real light. “These souls, who for whatever reason are not at rest, are also not aware they’ve passed on. They’re not part of consciousness as we know it. In fact the spectral light is salvation, a window to the next plane. . . . Carol Anne must help them cross over, and she will only hear her mother’s voice.”

Then she introduces the real issue of conflict—an evil spirit. “There’s one more thing. A terrible presence is in there with her. So much rage; so much betrayal. . . . I don’t know what hovers over this house, but it is strong enough to punch a hole into this world and take your daughter away from you.” This evil entity is, she says, another child to Carol Anne, but “to us, it is the beast.” The two lectures set up the big scene when mother love goes into the closet to rescue her child.

Up to this point, the film is consistent with the lectures. But it adds a coda that veers far from the Spiritualist frame with coffins rising from the earth because the greedy developer had moved only the headstones from a cemetery, not the remains of those buried there. Thus, the film plays on some well-worn but dependable themes: the threatened child, childhood fears, the sanctity of the family unit, the evils of television, and the greed of a businessman who does anything for a profit.

*Poltergeist*’s success inspired two sequels that build on the premises of the first film; but, not surprisingly, since Spielberg was no longer involved in the projects, neither lives up to the power of the original. Also, neither adapts the Spiritualist frame effectively, though *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986) does continue the malevolent spirit theme: a spirit who turns out to be Preacher Kane, a cult leader who took his people to the desert and killed them all. Apparently, it was he who caused all the trouble for the Freelings in Cuesta Verde.

*Poltergeist II* begins with the Freelings living with Diane’s grandmother, when the evil Kane finds them.<sup>36</sup> The remainder of the film

not in the novel) arrives and scoffs at her husband's beliefs, she disappears, apparently taken by the house, and Eleanor cries, "I'm the one it really wants. Can't you feel it? It's alive. Watching. Waiting." Eleanor gets her wish to stay in the house when she dies in a manner similar to the demise of the original Mrs. Crain, and her closing voice-over with the house in the background concludes the sentient house theme: "Silence lies steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and we who walk here, walk alone."

*The Shining* (1980), the Stanley Kubrick film based on the Stephen King novel, uses a similar frame to that of *The Haunting*. In the film, Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) takes a job as caretaker for the Overlook, a resort hotel in Colorado, during the winter months when the establishment is closed down. Jack and Wendy (Shelley Duvall), with their young son Danny (Danny Lloyd), are alone and isolated in the Outlook, which becomes the surrogate gothic castle for this haunted spaces story. Jack, a teacher, needs time to pursue his goal to be a writer, so the custodial job seems ideal.

The Spiritualism plot begins right away. Spiritualists would recognize Danny as a medium who has a spirit guide named Tony, whom he describes as the "little boy who lives in my mouth." Wendy and Jack assume Tony is the child's invisible friend. Tony speaks through Danny's mouth, indicating his presence by Danny's wagging finger, and sometimes tells Danny things in his dreams. During the interview visit to the hotel, Danny meets the head chef, Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), who is similarly gifted with psychic abilities and immediately recognizes them in Danny. A conversation between the two of them while Jack and Wendy get a tour of the building sets the frame and establishes the sentient house plot.

Dick had sent Danny a mind-to-mind message earlier. When they are alone, Dick says, "When I was a little boy, my grandmother and I could hold conversations entirely without ever opening our mouths. She called it 'shining.'" When Danny intimates that the Overlook scares him, Dick says, "You know, some places are like people. Some Shine; some don't. I guess you could say that the Overlook Hotel has something like shining." He goes on: "Well, you know Doc [the boy's nickname], when something happens, it can leave a trace of itself behind. Say like, if someone burned toast. Well maybe things that happened leave other kinds of traces behind. Not traces that anyone can notice but people who shine can see. I think a lot of things happened in this hotel over the years and not all of them were good." Like the House of Usher and Hill House, The Overlook is sentient. But the sentience for the Overlook derives from an accumulation of

about the confusion a departed spirit might feel goes quite far back. In the eighteenth century, Emanuel Swedenborg wrote, "The first state of man after death resembles his state in the world, for he is then likewise in externals, having a like face, like speech, and a like disposition, thus a like moral and civil life; and in consequence he is made aware that he is not still in the world only by giving attention to what he encounters. . . . Thus is one life continued into the other, and death is merely the passing from one to the other."<sup>41</sup> Contemporary medium George Eldred offers a similar view of the spirit immediately after death: "Not all [departed spirits] are aware of their passing, especially if the passing was sudden and with shock, such as sudden death by suicide, accident, etc. These entities will be clothed in their astral bodies, but will not recognize the fact because the astral body is an exact replica of the physical body." *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*, as well as many other ghost films, adapt these Spiritualist concepts to build suspense, adding a nicely framed bit of irony absent in other ghost films through reversal of audience expectations.

M. Night Shyamalan scored a major hit with his first effort as writer/director in 1999 with *The Sixth Sense*. The film touches on many of the New Age Spiritualism premises, though, like most films that use Spiritualism as frame, it greatly exaggerates them. Medium George Anderson expresses the sunniest of views of the afterlife. But he acknowledges that "sometimes, a soul will linger temporarily on earth if some issues of their lifetime have not been completely resolved."<sup>42</sup> So it goes in *The Sixth Sense*, with the added dimension of the departed spirit not understanding his condition.

Shyamalan's opening sequence establishes the rest of the action. His hero, psychiatrist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), is shot by Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg), a former child patient who, we later learn, has been driven mad as an adult because he sees ghosts all around him and blames Crowe, who did not believe in the supernatural, for not curing him. Crowe has just won a major award for his work with children, and just before the shooting, his wife, Anna (Olivia Williams), tells him, "You have a gift that teaches children to be strong in situations where most adults would piss on themselves." The lines explain Crowe's sense of duty, which from a Spiritualist perspective creates the attachment that keeps his ghost from the Other Side.

Allison DuBois expresses a well-worn dictum of New Age Spiritualism when she writes: "People who have endured great physical pain or trauma or who have died suddenly are often in shock following their deaths. Some spirits don't even realize they've died. They think they're simply spending time with their doctor, nurse, or loved one"

(83). In *Sixth Sense*, Crowe's spirit is oblivious to his true state after his brutal murder, and he tries to help another child, Cole Sear (a pun on *seer*), played by Haley Joel Osment. For very good reasons, though we don't know them yet, Cole reminds Malcolm of Grey. Speaking to Anna, his wife, who can't see him, Crowe says, "They're both similar. The same mannerisms, same expressions, same things hanging over their heads. . . . I feel like I'm being given a second chance, and I don't want it to slip away." From a Spiritualist perspective, Crowe's lines explain why his spirit is still on Earth. He is attached to this level by unfinished business. In a later scene, Malcolm explains his guilt about Grey to Cole in a story with wonderful dramatic irony: "He [Crowe] can't stop thinking about it. He can't forget. Ever since then, things have been different. He's not the same person he used to be." Clearly, he isn't, though most of the audience does not know it yet. He goes on to say that Cole reminds him of the other boy and he feels responsible.

At that point, Cole tells his secret, and his explanation fits Spiritualist doctrine very well. "I see dead people," the boy confides, and goes on, "They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're dead. . . . They're everywhere." Such is the lot of the medium, according to Spiritualist lore. Cole continues, "Did you ever feel the prickling things on the back of your neck . . . and the tiny hairs on your arm—you know, when they stand up? That's them. They get mad, and it gets cold." The explanation begins the lecture common to occult films, and the punishment Cole gets from angry spirits who want something from him dramatizes the cautionary tale element—it's dangerous to be in contact with the spirit world. But while Spiritualists acknowledge earthbound ghosts, most would deny that they could dole out the punishment that Cole receives.

In another irony in a film that abounds in ironies, Crowe becomes the designated doubter, a ghost who doesn't believe in ghosts, convinced, as he tells his tape recorder, that the boy is a schizophrenic who may need medication or hospitalization, the same sort of disbelief he had felt about Grey. But the film erases Crowe's doubts when the scene shifts to his basement where he reviews tapes of his sessions with Grey as a boy. When Malcolm goes out of the room for a few minutes during the session, the tape remains on, and in a bit of Spiritualist EVP, he hears in the white noise a voice speaking in Spanish, saying, "I don't want to die." Now he understands about spirits. Malcolm visits Cole, who has been hospitalized after an angry ghost attacks him. Malcolm suggests that the spirits just want help and he should talk to them. But he still does not know his own condition.

And so begins a vengeful ghost subplot. Cole gets a visit from the spirit of a young girl who had been slowly poisoned and wants her murderer exposed, which Cole and Malcolm succeed in doing. Cole has now learned to live with his gift, but it remains for Malcolm to experience his shock of recognition and do what Spiritualists say ghosts must do—cross over to the Other Side. As in so many films about ghosts, Malcolm is attached to a loved one, his wife, Anna. The audience, of course, has been led to believe that they are having marriage problems, as she seems to be giving him the cold shoulder when he talks to her. His jealousy when a man who is a business colleague makes advances to her produces “manifestations,” events, Spiritualists might say, that can happen when the spirit is emotional enough to focus the electrical energy of which it is composed.

Kendall Phillips notes that a central theme in *The Sixth Sense* is the “tension between the known and the unknown,”<sup>43</sup> for both characters and viewers. Malcolm’s knowledge as a therapist failed him in helping Vincent, and he does not understand his true state until late in the film. In yet another bit of irony, Phillips notes that the young boy knows more than the professional and in effect becomes the counselor’s counselor in leading Crowe to knowledge at the same time the film is leading the viewer to knowledge. Then when he finally realizes his state, Malcolm speaks to Anna in her sleep, the stage in which Spiritualists say we are most open to the Other Side, telling her, “I think I can go now. I just needed to do a couple of things. I needed to help someone,” expressing the Spiritualist concept of a ghost with a mission. Malcolm then fades into the light, yet another allusion to Moody’s books.

In *The Others* (2001), Grace Stewart (Nicole Kidman) and her two children Anne and Nicholas (Alakina Mann and James Bentley) live, so to speak, in a fog-bound manor house on one of the Channel Islands just following World War II. The children, we are told at the outset, have allergy to light and must be kept in a dark room. Actually, they are ghosts: metaphorically, they are “in the dark” about their condition and, a Spiritualist might say, kept out of the light that would have taken them to the Other Side. When three people, an older woman and man and a young girl, apply for positions as servants, Grace hires them, and we gradually learn that they too are ghosts. They claim to have been in service in this house in earlier days, and the woman, Bertha (Fionnula Flanagan), says that some places are so congenial that we just want to stay there forever. “If you don’t mind my saying so Ma’am, they were the best years of my life. That’s why we came by, because this house means a lot to us.” A primary reason for souls staying behind in spiritualist writing is attachment to



and the dead in the film, Spiritualists would say, are aware of each other because of the overlapping of the material and spiritual planes. The owners leave, frightened at living with ghosts. So at the end, Grace and the children repeat over and over, "This house is ours!" They are determined to be the earthbound ghosts of the Spiritualist tradition.

"WHAT DREAMS MAY COME WHEN WE HAVE SHRUGGED OFF THIS MORTAL COIL": IMAGES OF THE OTHER SIDE IN FILM  
*DEFENDING YOUR LIFE* AND *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*

To die, to sleep,  
To sleep—perchance to dream. Aye, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shrugged off this mortal coil?

(*Hamlet* 3.1.64–67)

Thus quoth that most quotable of Shakespeare's heroes, Prince Hamlet, addressing an issue that must appeal to all people. What happens to us when we die? Films that address this issue often portray a journey of some sort leading the characters to the Other Side after death. In *Between Two Worlds* (1944), a group of people find themselves on a cruise ship sailing through fog and gradually realizing that they are the souls of the dead, bound for Heaven or Hell. During the journey, we get a sorting out of those bound for each destination. In *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), a remake of *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), Joe Penleton finds himself in clouds with a plane trip scheduled for him. Some kind of transport cues the viewer for the trip at the Other Side.

*Defending Your Life* (1991) portrays a quite Spiritualist view of the afterlife, including the conventional journey to get there. It also demonstrates the cross fertilization of Spiritualism with New Age beliefs, with even a cameo appearance by Shirley MacLaine. Dan Miller (Albert Brooks, who also directed the film and wrote the script), a prosperous executive, dies when he crashes his brand new BMW convertible into a bus. In this journey to the Other Side, Dan takes an elevator and arrives in what is obviously the astral plane (sometimes spelled *plain*) for souls in the Western U.S. sector. When he arrives, he is dazed and falls into a deep sleep. This scene resembles Conan Doyle's description of dying: "Before entering upon his new life, the new spirit has a period of sleep which varies in its length, sometimes hardly existing at all, at others extending for weeks or months."<sup>45</sup> Dan has come to the place where spirits go to be judged

and live a quite pleasant life while they stay, complete with scrumptious food (you can't gain weight), plush accommodations, TV, and lots of places to shop.

Dan gets a defender, Bob Diamond (Rip Torn), a self-proclaimed advanced soul. Bob, like all the semipermanent residents of this plane, has a "big brain"—and ego to match. Bob tells Dan that ordinary humans use only 3 to 5 percent of their brains, while he, Diamond, uses 48 percent. When Dan worries that he might be in Hell or bound there, Bob reassures him with some good New Age Spiritualism doctrine: "Actually, there is no Hell, though I hear Los Angeles is getting pretty close," he chuckles. Then he follows with the lecture on Spiritualist doctrine that frames the film: "When you're born into the universe, you're in it for a long time. You have many lifetimes, and after each lifetime, there's an examining period, which you're in now. You see, every second of every lifetime is recorded, and as each lifetime ends, we sort of look at a few of the days, examine it, and then if everyone agrees, you move forward. The point of this whole thing is to get smarter, to keep growing, to use as much of your brain as possible. . . . When you use more than 3 to 5 percent of your brain, you don't want to be on earth. . . . There are many more exciting places to be."

Most modern followers of Spiritualism would agree. It's all about reincarnation and spiritual evolution, we're told in the film. "If worst comes to worst," Diamond tells him, "you'll go back to Earth and do it again." Dan has had twenty lives, Diamond tells him, and could have hundreds. But if one never gets it right, the soul is tossed to a spiritual scrap heap. And so Dan's trial begins, with him facing a tough prosecutor in Lena Foster (Lee Grant) who tells him that he was guilty of fear in life, the most common problem for earthly souls, we're told. Foster shows the two judges cinematic flashbacks ranging from Dan's youth to adulthood to demonstrate instances in which he failed to conquer fear, while his defender shows clips to counter the charges.

Most of the souls we see are the elderly, who died in bed; but Dan meets Julia (Meryl Streep), a young woman who had, like Dan, expired in an accident. They fall in love and in fact seem to be soul mates, though the film doesn't develop the concept. Julia is on a fast track to the next level as she lived an exemplary life, which included saving not only her children from a deadly house fire but dashing back into the house to save their cat. Deeply in love, she invites Dan to spend the night with her on their last day, but his fears keep him from accepting the love she offers. The film ends with Dan conquering his fear, as it seems his judges had planned for him to do.

*What Dreams May Come* (1988), based on Richard Matheson's novel of the same title, is the most comprehensive adaptation of New Age Spiritualism's description of the afterlife. The film establishes Chris and Annie Nielsen (Robin Williams and Annabella Sciorra) as soul mates, those who spend their many lifetimes together, when they meet and marry. Chris is a physician and Annie is an artist, and they have an idyllic life until their two children are killed in a traffic accident. Annie is devastated. Then Chris too is killed, compounding her depression.

The film introduces Chris's life, so to speak, as a ghost. Doc, his spirit guide (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), tries to get him to leave for the Other Side, but Chris clings to this world, trying to help Annie, finally leaving when he realizes he is doing more harm than good. The Other Side that Director Vincent Ward gives us is straight from descriptions by Spiritualist writers. Spiritualist George Trevelyan says that the Other Side is much like the world we know because it "is composed from thought and imagination. . . . Of course it is true that this is a plane of illusion; but that does not make the experience of it any less real."<sup>46</sup> George Anderson writes, "The souls create a garden of their own making . . . whatever is pleasing to them."<sup>47</sup> Thus, Chris's mind creates his world on the Other Side from a picture Annie had painted of the scene where they first met. Doc tells him "You're making all of this up. . . . We're all so unsure at first . . . . now you're creating an entire world here."

Director Vincent Ward creates a vivid visual pageant of the Other Side, which is, Sylvia Browne tells us, "a breathtaking infinity of mountains, and oceans, and vast gardens, and forests" with homes "designed to meet every entity's personal preference."<sup>48</sup> And Browne gives us the good news that we're always thirty on the Other Side and can change our looks as we please—hence the two Nielsen children's new appearance, his son Doc as the spirit guide and his daughter as an oriental woman of the type she had heard her father say he thought beautiful. Even the dog that Chris had been forced to put down when it was terminally ill shows up. In *The Afterlife Experiments*, Schwartz notes that "pets show up repeatedly in the readings" by mediums.<sup>49</sup>

Chris's enactment of the Orpheus myth provides the excitement for the end of the film. *What Dreams May Come's* version of Hell is rather outside the Spiritualist view of things and different from that of the novel, where the stay in Hell for Annie would be only the years she would have lived had she not killed herself. Many Spiritualists reject the concept of punishment after death. But not all. Anthony Borghia's books (which he claims come from a contact in the spirit world) describe levels of Heaven as well as "The Dark Realms," which are

not the eternal fires of the Christian tradition but decidedly unpleasant places for evildoers as well as those “*who had never, never done any good to a single mortal upon earth* [italics his].”<sup>50</sup> Conan Doyle sums up the nineteenth-century view in describing a place of punishment, confirming “the idea of heaven and a temporary penal state that corresponds to purgatory rather than Hell.”<sup>51</sup> Sylvia Browne identifies a stage between the dark entities who go through the “left-hand door” for immediate reincarnation and those who are influenced by both dark and white entities. Those who go into the light have as much time on the Other Side as they want before they carefully plan their next incarnation. Suicides who take their lives from despair or hopelessness, writes Browne, are gray entities who also go to the “holding place” to be reincarnated with the chance for better things, as do the dark entities.<sup>52</sup>

*What Dreams May Come*, however, doesn’t offer Annie much chance of reincarnation because of her suicide. Doc breaks the news to Chris that she is truly in Hell. The film generates some melodrama when Chris undertakes a journey there to find and rescue Annie, but according to the film, souls from Heaven can exist for only a short time in Hell before being absorbed by the place, and Chris would have been there forever had she not chosen to leave. Spiritualist Browne disagrees with that concept and makes the possibility of choice clear. Her version of the afterlife is that both Gray and Dark entities always have choice, and the film has Annie finally choosing for the right-hand door. The film plays off on this New Age Spiritualist concept but adds the possibility of eternity in Hell to build suspense.

#### COMEDY IN THE SPIRITUALIST FILM: *THE FRIGHTENERS* AND *GHOST BUSTERS*

Fear of ghosts can be traced through the centuries. Therefore, film comedies with ghosts provide dramatic tension between that fear and laughter at the comic situation. Thorne Smith figured that out with his *Topper* novels. His drawings of George and Marian Kirby, the deceased swinging couple, in the nude probably enhanced the books’ popularity in the repressed 1930s when the novels appeared. Fowkes mentions that ads for the film reminded audiences of nudity in Smith’s novels by trumpeting, “See an invisible beauty take a shower.”<sup>53</sup> In the first *Topper* film (1937, with sequels following), George and Marian (Cary Grant and Constance Bennett) are fully clothed spirits, however, though trapped on earth until they get their good deeds worked out. The films have little to nothing to do with

Spiritualism other than portraying ghosts as characters. But they establish the stock comic situation, to be repeated endlessly in comedies with ghosts, with Cosmo Topper (Roland Young) being the only one who can see the blithe spirits and speak to them, while others cannot see George and Marian and think Topper is mad.

*Topper* is but one of many film comedies or romances with the ghost theme, but few of them demonstrate influence from Spiritualism. *The Frighteners* (1996) is the first film for director Peter Jackson and the only real item in his résumé before getting his *The Lord of the Rings* project under way. Moreover, it reflects a good many details from Spiritualist lore.

Frank Bannister (Michael J. Fox) is a former architect who sees dead people after the trauma of losing his wife. Abandoning his profession because of his depression and loss, Frank calls on two ghost friends to "haunt" homes so that he can go in and "exorcise" them for a price. The film's premise is that these two rather raucous spirits missed the tunnel of light and have to wait for a year for it to come back for them, meanwhile helping Frank out by haunting and then being exorcised. Hence they are the earthbound ghosts of Spiritualist lore, though Spiritualist literature has no stories of a one-year wait for the light.

Frank loses control of his car and destroys a fence at the home of Ray and Lucy Lynskey (Peter Dobson and Trini Alvarado). To pay the damages, he sends his ghost friends to haunt their house and then does his phony exorcism, thus making the acquaintance of Lucy, a physician. The problem is that the returned ghost of Johnny Bartlett (Jake Busey), a Charles Starkweather imitator who had killed twelve people before being caught and executed, is killing to increase his score, with the numbers now in the upper thirties. His girlfriend and partner in crime Patricia Bradley (Dee Wallace) lives and assists the departed murderer. He kills Ray Lynskey, and Ray's ghost misses the tunnel, then badgers Frank for help in communicating with his pretty wife. Frank tells Ray's ghost,

"Why didn't you take the corridor?"

"What corridor?"

"The corridor of life, the passageway to the Other Side?"

Ray insists he's only twenty-nine and didn't belong there, to which Ray answers, in Spiritualist language, "In about a year's time, you're going to get a chance to go to the other side again to become what's known as a pure spirit, but in the meantime, you're what's known as an earthbound emanation, which is a cloud of bioplasmic emanations dripping ectoplasmic particles from every orifice."

The plot rolls along, with the evil ghost killing more people by

squeezing their hearts, and most go into the tunnel of light. Frank, as medium, can see the robed, hooded spirit. He can also see the numbers of the next victims on their forehead, just before the ghost gets them. Predictably, Frank and Lucy get romantic, with Ray's ghost (he'd been a bad husband and had squandered their savings) sitting in and raging against Frank. His invisibility to all but Frank is yet another adaptation of the comic situation in *Topper*.

All of this leads up to Frank seeing the number on Lucy's forehead, and from that point on the plot gets out of hand, with Frank dashing about trying to save her and even getting her to give him an out-of-body experience by flatlining him so that he can do battle with the evil ghost.

*Ghost Busters* (1984) gets some of its laughs by spoofing Spiritualist terminology. Academic slackers Peter Venkman (Bill Murray), Ray Stantz (Dan Aykroyd), and Egon Spengler (Harold Ramis) have grant-funded academic jobs to study the paranormal. When they get fired by a dean who thinks they should show results (they have none), they decide to set up their own ghost exterminator business. The problem is, nobody is currently infested. They finally get called to a luxury hotel to corral a spook with a voracious appetite but pretty much wreck the place before they capture it. Meanwhile, Dana Barrett (Sigourney Weaver), a concert musician, finds that her apartment is haunted, with the problem centered in her refrigerator. She calls on the Ghost Busters, but the hormonally challenged Peter is more interested in her bedroom than her kitchen.

Suddenly, the city is crawling, so to speak, with spirits, and Ghost Busters are big business. They even hire a fourth ghostketeer, Winston (Ernie Hudson). Eventually, we find that Dana's building was constructed by a mysterious occultist named Ivor Shandor after World War I. Convinced after the carnage of that war that the human race was not worth saving, he built it to attract the ancient god Gozor, who would end the world. As Ray tells Peter, "Your girlfriend lives in the corner penthouse of spook central." The film then boils down to our comic heroes confronting this supernatural entity, who arrives as the Sta-Puff marshmallow man.

Much of the film's humor spins off Spiritualist and pseudo-Spiritualist terminology and concepts. There are many ectoplasm slime jokes. When Ray, whose lines abound with Spiritualist terms, first finds "ectoplasmic residue" left by a "full torso apparition" in a library inhabited by a wayward spook, Peter responds, "So somebody blows their nose and you want to keep it?" Then when they confront another ghost, Ray calls it a "forced non-terminal repeating phantasm or a class five free-roaming vapor." Also, the film has broad satire of

classic occult thrillers. When Dana is possessed by Zuul, a Hittite demi-god who will assist the return of Gozer, she goes through some of the same tricks as Regan in *The Exorcist*, levitating and snarling. Then when Zuul first takes Dana, we see the imprint of hands on a metal door, and then when it opens Dana is pulled inside, in a scene that reminds us of Carol Anne's departure to the Other Side in *Poltergeist*. The ghosts in *Ghost Busters* are a far cry from those of Spiritualist lore. In fact, they look more like aliens than spirits. Obviously, however, Ramis and Aykroyd, who wrote the script, know enough about Spiritualism to spoof it, bending the lore toward the comic rather than the convincingly ghostly.

*Ghost Busters II* (1989) is more of the same. The Ghost Busters team has fallen on hard times, financially ruined by lawsuits and forgotten by a fickle public. Peter Venkman and Dana had a romance but have broken up, and Dana has a baby, perhaps from the man she had married and divorced after she broke up with Peter. But the baby's name is Oscar, no doubt a pun on Peter's name. Those nasty ghosts are still around though, this time a spirit who resides in a picture and wants out. He is Count Vigo, a sixteenth-century evil ruler of Carpathia and Moldavia whose voice sounds a lot like Bela Lugosi's version of Dracula. "Death is but a door. Time is but a Window. I'll be back," he says, this time echoing the Terminator. Other allusions abound, including yet another cinematic homage to the Odessa Steps scene with Dana's baby carriage getting away.

The wit of the first film doesn't carry over very well. We bounce from the machinations of the evil count to a river of ghost-producing slime under the city created by all the crankiness of the inhabitants of New York. Early Spiritualist texts describe ectoplasm as a substance emanating from the body of the medium and perhaps from others present that can take on many physical forms, such as that of the spirits present at séances. So the film stretches this definition to make this river of slime equate with ectoplasm, an emanation of irascible New Yorkers and the source for ghosts that plague the city. Ray continues his Spiritualist-sounding jargon, referring to it as "psychomagnotheric plasma." The evil Vigo wants to return to life by putting his spirit into a baby, and of course little Oscar is the child of choice. All of this leads to another comic finale, this time with a mass of Jell-O instead of Marshmallow.

#### "I CAN CALL SPIRITS FROM THE VASTY DEEP"

Thus spoke the Welsh ruler Glendower, a magician, to Hotspur in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*. And Hotspur responds, "Why, so

can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?"<sup>54</sup> (3.1.53–54). Spiritualists would agree that spirits do not respond to all callers. Most believe that only mediums can speak to the dead, though some say many people have latent ability to do so. Spiritualist churches regularly conduct seminars to teach people how to speak to the departed, though many of the Spiritualist persuasion would say that one must be born with that ability.

Spiritualism has drawn the fire of Christian conservatives from its very beginnings. In 1866, in the subtitle of his book *Spiritualism*, Reverend William McDonald termed Spiritualism to be "*Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft.*"<sup>55</sup> Later in the book, he thunders, "Men who wish to advance backward into Paganism, can do so by embracing modern Spiritualism."

Despite the condemnation of the religious right, the popularity of television series such as *Medium* and *Ghost Whisperer*, as well as films that adapt Spiritualist ideas, though often greatly exaggerated for sensational storytelling, suggests that many people are interested in knowing what happens when we die. Cole Sear's plaintive whisper "I see dead people" will surely continue to resonate for all who ponder "what dreams may come."



## 6

## “This rough magic I here abjure”

SO SPOKE THAT GREATEST OF SHAKESPEARE’S MAGICIANS PROSPERO in *The Tempest* after he has completed his revenge and made all happy. Prospero goes on to tell the audience “I’ll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth . . . I’ll drown my book” (5.1.50–55). So too must end this discussion of films that adapt “rough magic” for their story lines, but while Spiritualism, New Age paths, Satanism, and Wicca are the roads most taken in the occult film, a few others are worth brief discussion.

“DO DO THAT VODOO THAT YOU DO SO WELL”:  
VODOO IN THE HORROR FILM

“You do something to me,” songwriter Cole Porter wrote in one of his best-known lyrics. “Do do that voodoo that you do so well,” he wrote in this love song, alluding to a central element of the African nativist religion voodoo: supernatural possession. Perhaps no religion or occult path is so focused on spirits occupying human bodies as voodoo, a religion brought to the Caribbean from Africa with the importation of slaves. It offers excellent potential as a fictional frame for horror films. Few spiritual paths are more recognizably occult than voodoo (sometimes spelled voodoun, voodau, or voodoo) with its secret teachings and claims of supernatural powers. In Haiti, the spiritual home of voodoo, slaves were converted to Roman Catholicism but saw no conflict in combining elements of native African religion with Catholic teachings.

Voodoo has evolved a complex social structure. The priest, or *hungan*, is a spiritual leader at ceremonies, a seer, a healer, and a counselor who is believed to be gifted with clairvoyance, while a female version, the *mambo*, may assist and have many of the same attributes. Ceremonies are held in a structure called the *humfro*. The purpose of the ceremony is to attract a *loa*, or *lwa*, a spiritual being, one of the chil-

dren of God who has prescient knowledge; according to one *hungan*, “the Great Maker created them to be of use to Mankind.”<sup>1</sup> During the ecstatic voodoo ceremony, the *loa* “mounts” one of those present, who becomes its “horse.” Voodoo practitioners believe that during the period of possession, the horse is almost impervious to injury and takes on the personality of the spirit. Sensational stories of exploits by the mounted horse abound. Bach describes seeing individuals handle red hot iron and walk through burning coals while possessed, with no injury apparent.<sup>2</sup> Even academic anthropologist Alfred Métraux tells of somewhat less sensational but nonetheless impressive displays. He describes the transformation of a seriously arthritic and lame *mambo* in which she becomes nimble enough to walk quickly without apparent pain during a brief possession. He also saw possessed individuals being pierced with knives or other sharp objects without apparent injury.

Many lurid and grisly tales of voodoo rites have been spread over the years. In *Hayti, or the Black Republic*, Spencer St. John reports as fact stories of human sacrifice and cannibalism at ceremonies in the mid-nineteenth century, and such tales have also been connected in recent days to Santeria, another amalgam of African spiritual paths with Catholicism. Indeed, Métraux states that human sacrifice probably was practiced “on a large scale” in the African antecedents of voodoo.<sup>3</sup> But St. John’s sensational stories seem the stuff of folklore that has evolved since the marriage of Catholicism and the African animist religions of Africa. Voodoo and Santeria have taken a firm foothold in the United States, with the immigration of millions from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Haiti, many of whom practice these religions, which have spread to the broader population and have achieved the status of new religious movements among scholars.

In fact, voodoo offers interesting parallels to other religions. The “mounting” by the *loa* seems quite similar to the “baptism in the spirit” trances and speaking in tongues in ecstatic Christian groups such as the Pentecostals. The *loa*, for instance, have their own language called *langage*, spoken by the *hungan* and those possessed during ceremonies. Also, the voodoo perspective on death has parallels to Catholic dogma (complete with a purgatory) and Spiritualism. Bach describes a ceremony he claims to have witnessed in which the *mambo* takes on a role quite like that of a Spiritualist trance medium.<sup>4</sup> But of all the lore of voodoo, tales of the zombie have the most allure for scriptwriters.

When Universal Studios discovered a strong profit potential for low-budget horror movies with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (1931), imitators would soon follow. One was *White Zombie* (1932), an inde-

pendent production distributed by United Artists, scripted by Garnett Weston and directed by Victor Halperin. The Universal horror hits had adapted story lines (quite loosely) from literary works. But the occult religion voodoo with its zombie lore had inspired an exotic body of legend that was made to order for a horror film.

The film is set in Haiti—"zombie central" in the public imagination. *White Zombie* opens with a young engaged couple, Madeleine and Neil (Madge Bellamy and John Harron), in a carriage on the way to the Haitian home of plantation owner Charles Beaumont (Robert Frazer) where they will be married. Scriptwriter Weston capitalizes on the recent popularity of *Dracula* by making the opening carriage ride reminiscent of Jonathan Harker's trip to Castle Dracula, a voyage from the rational world of civilization to the realm of supernatural possibilities. Beaumont, who also owns sugar mills, has promised Neil a job, but actually he is obsessed with Madeleine. When she refuses his advances, Beaumont enlists the aid of the local zombie master, Murder Legendre (Bela Lugosi). Murder uses zombies as slaves in his own sugar mills. For a fat payment, he zombifies Madeleine and stashes her away in his castle, where Beaumont goes to be with her. All of this results in some derring-do by Neil and the local missionary, Dr. Bruner (Joseph Cawthorn), to foil Beaumont's plans.

*White Zombie* is the first film that survives today to adapt voodoo lore. Murder gets his victims through a powder, here given to Madeleine as an inhalant from a rose at her wedding, and "zombie powder" has often been reported as the means of transforming the living to the walking dead in Haiti. Also, the film gives us the conventional lectures that establish the frame in films about occult paths. During the carriage drive in the opening trip to Beaumont's home, Madeleine and Neil see a line of men shambling stiffly along, and the Black driver cries "Zombies!" He goes on, "They are not men, Monsieur, they are zombies . . . the living dead, corpses taken from their graves and made to work in sugar mills and fields at night." Later, Reverend Bruner tells Neil, "There are superstitions in Haiti that natives brought here from Africa. Some of them can be traced as far back as ancient Egypt and beyond to the country that was old when Egypt was young," an allusion no doubt to the legend of Atlantis.

The description of zombies in the films probably came from Seabrook's book *The Magic Island*. Published in 1929, the book would have been current at the time the script was written and was a Literary Guild selection. Seabrook claims to have lived with Haitian natives in various locations and to have closely studied their religion and superstitions. At one point, Seabrook describes a conversation with Poly-nice, a Haitian much less superstitious than most but who affirms the

The real plot begins when a pharmaceutical company sends him to Haiti to find the drug that turns people into zombies, assuming that it would have medicinal value. The island is in chaos, due to the eminent collapse of the "Baby Doc" Duvalier regime. The Ton Ton Macute, the regime's secret police, is on the lookout for subversives. Dennis goes to a clinic operated by Marielle Duchamp (Cathy Tyson), a psychiatrist, and finds her to be a follower of voodoo. She tells him, "There is great beauty in it [voodoo] . . . There is no conflict between my science and my field. . . . In Haiti, God is not just in his heaven; he's in our bodies, our flesh."

The conflict develops from their search for a specific zombie, Christophe, who had been turned into one by the evil Dargent Peutrand (Zakes Mokae), a master of voodoo magic and a head of the Ton Ton Macutes. Under the "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier regimes, the Ton Ton Macute had cultivated the belief that they were voodoo adepts, a notion that the film enthusiastically supports and exploits for the horror element. Eventually, Alan locates Christophe and finds he is a zombie whose mind has survived. Zombies, it turns out, in Davis's book as well as in *White Zombie*, are created with "zombie powder," concocted of poisonous puffer fish, sea toad, and other noxious ingredients. They appear to be dead, but come alive in the coffin after burial, and if not dug up in time, they suffer brain damage, hence the "zombie" appearance. The film adds a great deal of sensationalism, with Petraud having magical abilities beyond anything in the annals of voodoo research or even folklore.

The film transforms an already sensational book into Hollywood blood and thunder, but the search for the zombie powder may have some validity. Seabrook quotes the Criminal Code of the Republic of Haiti:

Article 249. Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not zombies and zombie powder do exist, the framers of the code certainly considered them as possibilities.

### INCUBI AND SUCCUBI AND ENTITIES, OH MY! *THE ENTITY AND INCUBUS*

In *Kubla Khan*, a mystical poem based, according to the buzz of literary history, on a dream caused by a bit of undigested opium, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes of

A savage place! As holy and enchanted  
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
 By woman wailing for her demon lover!

The British Romantic poets seem fond of this fantasy, that of sexual possession by a demon lover, and often adapt it as symbolic of the creative imagination. John Keats's dreamy poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" tells of a knight who meets such a woman who enchants him with her love, but in a dream after their lovemaking he sees

Pale Kings, and Princes too  
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all,  
 They cried, La belle dame sans merci  
 Thee hath in thrall.

These poems and many others allude to an enduring tradition of supernatural beings who possess their prey with powerful sexual experiences. Henry Fuseli's late eighteenth-century painting "The Nightmare" is a stunning visualization of the incubus figure.

Not all supernatural entities, for want of a better term, are sexual predators. As we have seen, possession by spiritual beings is a common theme in the occult, though not always quite so romantic as those described by Coleridge and Keats. The Delphic Oracles in ancient Greece, the *Pythia*, were women said to be possessed by Apollo, the god of prophecy (among other things) and given prophetic power. Tales of satanic possession go back through the centuries. In voodoo, the *loa* possesses the body of the believer, and the Spiritualist trance medium claims to be possessed by his or her spirit guide.

But from earliest times tales have been told of sexual attacks by spiritual entities with occult powers. The word *nightmare* comes from the Latin word *incubo*, meaning "to lie upon," and the word inspires our word *incubus*, meaning a spiritual entity that attacks women, while the *succubus* is a female sexual predator. In many versions of the legend, the spirit could take either male or female form. Mythology and legend are peppered with tales of such sexual attacks. The Greek god Zeus pursues many a fair mortal maid in Greek myth, and tales of lecherous spirits of both male and female persuasion abound in Chinese, African, and Middle Eastern mythology. The European Middle Ages was a time especially prolific with tales of the incubus and succubus, possibly because of the sexual repression of the day. The incubus offered a good excuse for out-of-wedlock pregnancy for women, especially for those in orders. Kiessling sums up the significance of this cross-cultural phenomenon in his study of the incubus/

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**Henry Fuseli, *Nightmare*, 1781. In Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts* (New York, 1807). Image courtesy of the Special Collections Library, Muhlenberg College.**

away as soon as we got down to the basic problem, as though it were me.” Sneiderman replies, “It is you, Carla.” Then when her boyfriend Jerry is present at one of the attacks and sees her raped, he leaves her. And in her final confrontation with the entity, Carla’s scream echoes the thought of many women in her situation: “You can torture me, kill me, anything. But you can’t touch *me!*” Seen as metaphor, *The Entity* is a thought-provoking film.

Apparently, the B horror film industry finds great potential in the incubus legend, as a total of eight films with the title *Incubus* have been produced. Of them all, only *Incubus* (1981) has some pretensions to rise above the “B” category, with star quality performers like John Cassavetes and John Ireland both rather late in their careers, but it is hardly “A”-line work, interesting only in its combination of the traditional occult incubus lore with some Wiccan and New Age beliefs. Dr. Samuel Cordell (Cassavetes) moves to Galen, a small town, with his fifteen-year-old daughter after his first wife dies and after a disastrous second marriage to a much younger woman. In Galen, a young man is killed and his girlfriend brutally raped at a nearby lake. What is unusual is the extraordinary quantity of sperm recovered from the girl and also the fact that “it’s red, and it moves at a much different rate of speed,” as Cordell tells the local police chief (Ireland).

The rapes continue, with the woman either bleeding to death or with her uterus torn apart. Meanwhile, Jenny’s boyfriend, Tim Galen (the town is named for his family), has terrible dreams of a woman being tortured by hooded figures. Moreover, he finds that every time he has the dream, someone dies. The dreams are driving him to distraction. The script delves into New Age reincarnation beliefs when Galen tells his grandmother, “I’ve lived before, in different lives in different forms. I think my past has something to do with these murders.” His grandmother, Agatha, is very protective of Tim, but we occasionally see her reading in her basement from *Arts Perditas*, a book of black magic spells, and the personal writings of an ancestor called Jonah Galen.

The film’s lecture establishing the frame comes when Cordell and Laura Kincaid (Kerrie Keane), editor of the town’s newspaper, go to the local library, where they find a book with a description of the incubus. She reads it to the group: “It materializes through dream and nightmare. This demonic spirit can also serve both men and women. Incubi were driven by the need to procreate and were known to copulate with and impregnate women.” The description is accurate of the tradition, with various stories from the Middle Ages crediting this entity to become either sex.<sup>11</sup> The story then develops a witch persecu-

tion theme with a surprise ending, concluding a sort of mishmash of occult plot lines.

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND: SPACE GODS AND MESSIAHS:  
*THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL, 2001:*  
*A SPACE ODYSSEY, THE BROTHER FROM ANOTHER*  
*PLANET, AND STARMAN*

The 1950s were the heyday of the science-fiction B movie. Most focused on the arrival of powerful and threatening alien entities. Films like *The Blob* and *The Thing* were really horror movies, with little science in the fiction. Others had imbedded political statements, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* with its allegorical warning of Communist subversion. A few, like George Pal's *Destination Moon* and *When Worlds Collide*, avoided the monster movie theme and actually speculated about our place in the cosmos, one of the attractions of the science-fiction literary genre. Many of these films reflect the myriad reports of UFOs during this period and the intense speculation about aliens among us.

One of the results of the UFO controversy has been the spawning of what are now generally recognized as new religious movements. Despite debunkers from government and scientific communities, millions of people believe that they have seen UFOs or accept the stories of those who say they have. Robert Ellwood, one of the most astute observers of new religious movements, finds many elements common to all religions in the UFO cults, including "prophets," those who say they have been contacted. He writes, "For the contactees and their believers, UFOs clearly possessed a revelatory significance that can only be termed religious." He notes that the alien takes on the quality of "descending gods, angels, saintly apparitions, and heavenly saviors," while the "men in black" style visitors are demonic. He goes on to "put religious UFOism alongside Spiritualism on the grounds that it is essentially a new popular religion of the same type" and compares revelations claimed by contactees with those of early Theosophists from hidden Great White Masters.<sup>12</sup> J. Gordon Melton concurs: "The survey of the contactee movement has verified a conclusion raised earlier that the flying saucer movement is in effect a new branch of occult religion. It follows the patterns of occult religious bodies and derives most of its content from general occult teachings."<sup>13</sup>

By this definition, the aliens' powers in many films are the equivalent of the magical occult, and in an age when many ponder the co-



nundrum of our existence, space and the infinite and unfolding mystery of the universe offer possible answers to the big questions: "What is the meaning of life" and "Why are we here." Outer space and the universe are, after all, in the words of the *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: Next Generation* TV programs, "the final frontier." Thus, many today find the answers there. Perhaps, according to this view, the true messiahs are beings from another planet who created us or will save us.

So it was for the Heaven's Gate cult. They believed that the Hale-Bopp comet would take them home to another planet. In a message left behind quoted in a March 28, 1997, *New York Times* article, the cult leader Do wrote that they were "shedding their containers" and "leaving this planet." "By the time you read this," the statement read, "we'll be gone—several dozen of us. We came from the Level of Above Human in distant space and we have now exited the bodies that we were wearing for our earthly task, to return to the world from whence we came—task completed."

Other space cults (or sects, depending on one's attitude toward them) abound. Claude Vorihon (called Raël by followers) founded the Raélians in 1973. He teaches that the Hebrews got it all wrong about Jehovah being one god who created the earth and mankind. Rather, humanity came into being through cloning by a superior race of aliens called the Elohim, "Those who came from the sky." The International Raëlian Religion claims 20,000 members in the United States and abroad. They hope for immortality through cloning by the Elohim and conduct four "festivals" each year that enable the Elohim to fly overhead and record their DNA.<sup>14</sup> Other such groups include the Aetherius Society, the Unarians, and Urantians. They share beliefs with fringe elements of Christianity and the New Age such as "the spreading of teachings (or transmissions) of the cosmic mind," directly from beings like the ascended masters of Theosophy as well as karma, channeling, and spiritual healing.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the references to other planets, aliens, and space, the message about the afterlife could have come from any one of many occult religions. As do all religions, science-fiction cults have well developed creation myths (usually involving seeding of Earth by aliens) and revelations to charismatic individuals from the godlike cosmic masters.

Many science-fiction writers have captured the theme of advanced space beings with seemingly occult powers, often benign messiahs or creators of our species; and filmmakers have not been far behind. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Starman* (1984), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), and many other films give us such godlike aliens. In an insightful article, Caron

Schwartz Ellis describes the sort of messianic alien life form portrayed in these science-fiction films. Ellis writes:

Each visitor, despite his familiarly human, non threatening appearance, is regarded with awe and fear—as a holy person and a fiend, a highly evolved superman creature and a charlatan. The earth person's reaction toward the alien seems ambiguous and confused. The spaceman, seeming to burst out of nowhere into the everyday world, may be regarded as a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. And the ambivalent earthling response of attraction and dread, fascination and fear, love and disgust reflects the visitor's numinous or sacred quality. The alien is, quite simply, Other, not one of us.<sup>16</sup>

In many of the science-fiction B horror films, the alien is similar to the Satanic Other. In some films the space visitors are creators or prophets, benign and God-like with powers that seem occult to mere mortals. These powers are rooted in the alien's superior technology, a technology that fits science-fiction writer Arthur Clarke's comment on magic in his Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Gregory Benford announced a parallel corollary: "Any technology that does not appear magical is insufficiently advanced."<sup>17</sup>

Surely the most powerful filmic space gods, similar to those described by some UFO cults, are those who created the human race, or at least set it on its path to full humanity, as in Stanley Kubrick's stunning *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The script is a collaboration between Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, divided into four parts, beginning with a sort of post-Darwinian "Genesis," an anti-Eden with proto humans populating a garden where survival of the fittest rules. Ape people shamble about on all fours, prey to the big cats, and are on the verge of extinction. From a Darwinian perspective, they have no survival traits that would allow them to adapt to a hostile desert environment.

A strange monolith visits them, sent, we learn, by benign aliens. The film's pattern of symbolic imagery is difficult to interpret for most viewers; but those who read Clarke's novel, published simultaneously with the release of the film, will learn that these aliens seek species suitable for evolutionary growth. The monolith alters the proto humans' brains, giving them intelligence and tool-making abilities, as we see when the alpha male ape-man, called Moon Watcher in the novel, "gets it." It was he who had approached the monolith first and tasted it, no doubt an allusion to the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis. In the later scene when he has his epiphany, he holds a bone, stares at it for a time with the camera focusing on his opposable

thumb, and repeatedly crashes it as a club on tapir bones; then the scene cuts to the tribe eating meat they have killed. The monolith sent by the aliens has transformed the ape-men from prey, as we saw earlier when one of them is killed by a leopard, to predators.

The bone-club, then, is the first tool, and it leads to the evolution of humans as toolmakers, significantly a weapon we see used in a confrontation of tribes. And when the scene shifts to several thousand years in the future on a space shuttle, we see a pen floating in the gravity-free environment, an evolutionary development of the primitive tool in the first version. As the film progresses, we see the splendid technology of the moon station that leads to the discovery of the monolith there and the signal it sends toward Jupiter.<sup>18</sup> The third section of the film portrays the voyage to Jupiter with the spaceship under the control of HAL<sup>19</sup> the artificial-intelligence computer, who represents the end result of human technology and demonstrates the limits of humanity's development of machines.

The *Discovery* serves as a visual symbol for the cybernetic world possible in the final stage of technology, with HAL as the pantheistic god machine whose electronic tendrils reach every part of that world. But like humans, he has emotional conflicts that drive him to insanity, causing him to kill one of the astronauts and attempt to kill the other. The battle between Dave (Keir Dullea), the surviving astronaut, and HAL repeats the alpha males' battle at the watering hole in the first segment of the film, and it also shows the end result of humanity's technological development. HAL, created by humans, shares humanity's capacity for violence and descent into madness.

In the final segment, when Dave finds the monolith near Jupiter, we see the culmination of the godlike aliens' goal in luring him there. Clarke's novel gives details of Dave's faster-than-light trip, with the astronaut coming to a sort of junkyard of spaceships, remnants of other trips to the place of transformation. The film compresses all this into a montage of images and then Dave's arrival and a symbolic aging process before he becomes the star child, a new species. He returns to Earth, a new life created by aliens with what Clarke might describe as a technology so advanced that it passes for occult magic. The Raëlians or Unarians might see such a creation myth as more fact than fiction and the film's conclusion as a consummation devoutly to be wished for, much as Christians anticipate the return of Christ or some Muslims the Mahdi.

*2001* had a powerful impact on the film audience in 1968—and beyond. Few viewers may have understood the full import of what they were seeing. But it was the beginning of the Age of Aquarius and of Marshall McLuhan when “the medium is the message” was a byword.

Viewers were transported by the groundbreaking combination of visual image and sound; and perhaps "transport" is the proper word, for even though most who saw the film, including many reviewers, had little explanation of the story line, most understood the theme of transcendence, so much a part of the New Age philosophy that was being born. Clarke has been quoted as saying, "MGM doesn't know it yet, but they've footed the bill for the first \$10,500,000 religious film."<sup>20</sup> Obviously, Clarke doesn't mean religion in the traditional sense, but most critics point out the film's metaphysical quality. Michael E. Thron writes, "The alien is the mystical intrusion upon the scientific and mundane world of western evolution. The final alien is not a character at all with inside and outside but an idea, the idea of the mystical reality of the universe."<sup>21</sup>

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), directed by Robert Wise, gives us a similarly mystical figure, Klaatu (Michael Rennie) who, unlike the aliens of *2001*, is at least anthropomorphic. He also has a special kind of sidekick, Gort, the robot. The alien's arrival triggers mass panic and a military response, as his flying saucer speeds to Earth and lands in Washington, D.C. on a baseball field. Events are reported to us by various radio newsmen of the day, Gabriel Heater, Drew Pearson, and even H. V. Kaltenborn, he who famously miscalled a victory by Thomas Dewey over Harry Truman on election night in 1948. Interestingly, only one scene shows news from television, an indication that Hollywood felt particularly threatened by the medium in the 1950s.

At any rate, as Klaatu descends from his ship with Gort saying, "We have come to visit you in peace with good will," he produces a device that might have looked like a weapon, and a soldier shoots and wounds him. As the soldiers take him away to a hospital, Klaatu tells them, "This [the device] was a gift for your president. With it he could have studied life on other planets." But significantly, the soldier—symbolizing the military, often the villain in these films—shoots first and asks questions later.

In the hospital, Klaatu tells the president's secretary that he wants to speak to an assembly of world leaders, thus perhaps originating the line "take me to your leader." He tells the secretary that the union of planets he represents has taken note of "primitive atomic activity" on Earth that might lead to atomic spaceships. Such an aggressive species, they feel, cannot be allowed space travel without agreeing to the principles the union has established. If no agreement is reached, the Earth would be destroyed. But when the president tries to arrange such a meeting of world leaders, no mutually agreeable spot can be found.

This plan of a meeting failing, Klaatu escapes from the hospital to

learn something about Earth's common people. He takes a room in a boardinghouse under the name of Carpenter. Here he meets Helen Benson (Patricia Neal) and her son Bobby (Billy Gray). He takes to Bobby, and through the boy finds and meets with a scientist, Professor Barnhardt, and arranges a meeting with other top scientists. But before they can meet, Klaatu's friendship with the boy and his mother leads to his identity being discovered by Helen's fiancé, Tom Stevens (Hugh Marlowe), who calls the authorities, and Klaatu is shot dead on his way to the ship. But before he is shot, he gives Helen, who has tried to help him escape, the magic words to speak to Gort that have been enshrined in science-fiction lore, "Klaatu barada nichto," a signal not to destroy the Earth and apparently an order to retrieve his body, which the robot does after Helen speaks the words to him. Gort uses the ship's technology to revive Klaatu so that we can deliver his final message.

Klaatu is a Christ figure. He takes the name Carpenter, appropriate since Jesus was apparently a carpenter before taking up his mission. His advanced technology meets Clarke's definition of magic and the occult. He is betrayed by a Judas figure, Helen's fiancé. When Helen tries to stop him from contacting the military for the sake of the world, he responds, "I don't care about the world"; and like Christ, Klaatu is raised from the dead, albeit with the ship's technology. Also, the U.S. government and the military are effective emblems of Pharisees and Romans, while the world scientists who respond to Klaatu's message are equivalents of the disciples.

When he has risen, Helen, who is present, cries, "You have the power of life and death?" "No," he responds, "that power is reserved for the Almighty Spirit." His technology can only "restore life for limited periods." But restore life it does, as Christ is restored, and Helen serves as a Mary Magdalene figure of sorts, for it was Mary who found that Christ had arisen (John 20). Then he strides outside the ship in his spaceman suit to deliver his messianic message, one appropriate for the new atomic age. "The universe grows smaller every day. And the threat of aggression by any group, anywhere, can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all or no one is secure. Now this does not mean giving up any freedom except the freedom to act irresponsibly." He goes on to describe a union of planets that has created robots like Gort who act as police and bring "immediate destruction to all aggressors" in what sounds like a biblical apocalypse.

Director John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984) plays on the "stranger in a strange land" and "noble savage" themes familiar to New Age films and to science-fiction films about godlike aliens. The opening

scenes show the space probe *Voyager II* shooting out across the cosmos, broadcasting messages of welcome in several languages, plus The Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction." An alien race accepts the invitation, sending an ambassador, whose craft is promptly shot down by the U.S. Air Force. The alien, seen as a globe of light, enters the home of Jenny Hayden (Karen Allen), who is still in deep mourning for the death of her husband Scott. The alien presence has many of the characteristics of a ghost in the Spiritualist tradition, turning on and off electrical appliances and appearing as a light orb. But eventually, it finds a strand of hair kept as a memento in an album of pictures and clones itself from the hair into a new Scott (played by Jeff Bridges), going from baby to adult form before Jenny's eyes when she awakens during the process.

The alien has a supply of small spheres that do wonderful tricks, including sending a message to his home planet asking for a rescue. So he more or less kidnaps the reluctant Jenny, who is both attracted and repelled by his likeness to her dead husband, to drive him from her home in Wisconsin to a crater near Winslow, Arizona, where a ship from his home world will pick him up. After various attempts to escape, Jenny falls in love with the alien, and the alien grows fond of the bodily sensations that earthlings enjoy—food, music, and eventually sex with Jenny. The film ends with an "on the road" passage with Jenny and the alien pursued by the CIA and NSA.

The script for *Starman*, by Bruce A. Evans and Raynold Gideon, is both literate and witty. Evans and Gideon get some of the same humor out of the innocent but benign Starman that Robert Heinlein achieved with his visitor to Earth in the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Like Michael Valentine Smith in Heinlein's novel, Starman knows just a little about the English language and nothing about idiom and confuses nonverbal communications like a thumbs up and a middle finger up. Also, like Michael Valentine Smith, Starman is a Christ figure, though the metaphor gets a bit scrambled as the film goes on.

During their journey, when the two stop at a restaurant, Starman sees a dead deer strapped to a hunter's car. In a scene that reflects Starman's status as the noble savage of literary lore, whose holy innocence allows him to criticize the society he finds himself in, he asks Jenny about it. "People hunt them to eat for food," she replies. "Do deer eat people," he asks. "No," she responds. "Do people eat people?" he asks. "No! What do you think we are?" "I think you are a very primitive people," he responds. Later, Jenny glances out the window of the restaurant and sees Starman bringing the deer to life, as Christ does to Lazarus. Then when the hunter and his friends are

beating the Starman for releasing the deer, she saves him by firing rounds in the air from her pistol. In a bit of nifty wordplay from screenwriters Evans and Gideon, Jenny cries as she runs to assist the fallen Starman, "Oh Jesus, are you o.k.?" The grammar of the sentence offers a double entendre that could either be an exclamation of Jenny's concern or a salutation that establishes the character's symbolic nature. Later, Starman heals Jenny with the next-to-last of his spheres after she is shot by a policeman during a chase.

Then the Christ metaphor becomes a bit murkier. Jenny has told Starman that she and Scott could not have children because she is physically unable to conceive. As the two fall more deeply in love, they have sex as they travel in an empty boxcar after they have hopped a train. Starman, with the comically human silly grin of the satisfied lover on his face, tells her, "I gave you a baby." She assures him she cannot have children, but he tells her that it will be a son who will be Scott's baby but also his. And "he will know everything I know, and when he grows to manhood he will be a teacher." The story loosely parallels the Immaculate Conception, for after all, Jenny is short for Virginia, as the Virgin Mary. Her husband Scott had been a house painter, not a carpenter, but the parallel to Mary and Joseph is close enough.

*The Brother from Another Planet*, a 1984 low-budget film with a message, has an alien—a Black humanoid with only three toes and a nasty nail problem—crashing into the ocean in New York harbor. He emerges from the water at Ellis Island, an alien immigrant, with the Statue of Liberty in the background. He had been a slave on another planet, and he has two of the "men in black" figures from UFO lore who are slave catchers (white men, of course) on his tail. Brother (Joe Morton) cannot speak, but we soon see his occult powers. He has lost a leg below the knee, but as he hops down the city streets, he grows a new one. He is another stranger in a strange land, who, unlike Starman, cannot communicate at all, except by gesture.

He goes inside a bar with a Black clientele, where the patrons are at first rather negative to him, thinking him a wino or mental incompetent. They gradually warm to him, and when he does a laying-on-of-hands (another Christ allusion) to fix a defective video game machine, he has made friends. Odell, the owner, gives him enough money to be a boarder at Randy Sue Carter's home. There he does his laying-on-of-hands to heal a cut knee for Randy Sue's son. And so it goes throughout the film, with Brother (the only name he gets) healing people and himself and repairing machines by putting his hands on them and concentrating. When he lays his hands on buildings or other objects, he gets flashes of bad things that have happened

quotations from that eminent New Age philosopher Yoda, "Luminous things are we, not this crude matter"; and elsewhere he says, "Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not." In *The Tenth Insight*, James Redfield offers a similar view and clearly an answer to Neo-Darwinists that is often echoed in films:

We could look at history not as the bloody struggle of the human animal, who selfishly learned to dominate nature and to survive in greater style, pulling himself from life in the jungle to create a vast and complex civilization. Rather, we could look at human history as a historical process, as the deeper, systematic effort of soul, generation after generation, life after life, struggling through the millennia toward one solitary goal: to remember what we already knew in the afterlife and to make this knowledge conscious on Earth.<sup>25</sup>

Most of those who follow paths from the new occult would probably accept this view, and those who don't might take comfort from it.

In the last resort, we are unlikely to find an answer to the eternal questions of why we are here and whether life has meaning until the sands of our hourglass have run out. Perhaps Alper is right, and it is the hard-wiring of our genetic package that makes the message of hope in occult films attractive. He would surely agree with Dr. Sneiderman, quoted above from *The Entity*, when he exclaims: "Our reason, our intelligence, that's the only thing that distinguishes us from any other species of animal," and transcendence of reason plays no part in his equation. On the other hand, we have the words of Prince Hamlet to his friend after he meets his father's ghost: "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.166–67). A central function of occult religions and the films that portray them is to bring us dreams of those things that Horatio has not dreamt of, even if we get no hard answers. That wise old Prospero in what was Shakespeare's final comedy, sums up all we can know for certain: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" (*The Tempest*, 4.1.156–58).



## Notes

### CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1. An early example of the controversy is an 1860 debate on evolution held at Oxford between Bishop Wilburforce and Thomas Henry Huxley, with the latter defending Darwin's theory. Wilburforce asked Huxley whether "it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey?" Huxley is said to have replied he "was not ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor; but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth." *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, vol. 1 (New York, 1990), 197–98. The debate has continued to the present, especially in education, from the Scopes trial in 1925 to various attempts to replace the teaching of evolution with creationism in schools' curricula in the twenty-first century.

2. Southern Baptist Convention, "Southern Baptist Faith and Message." <http://www.SBC.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>.

3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 21.

4. See Association of Religion Data Archives presentation of American National Election Survey. <http://www.thearda.com>. It is difficult to know exactly what these figures mean, as many among those who say they do not believe in evolution might accept the concept of creative evolution rather than the Darwinian version.

5. *New York Times*, February 14, 2003, national editing, A-8 and 10.

6. ARDA Web site. American National Election Studies (2004) and General Social Survey (2004).

7. ARDA, Baylor Religious Survey (2005).

8. The University of Virginia Religious Movements Web page includes an extensive list of NRMs, with dozens of them that would be defined as occult. See <http://www.religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu>.

9. Ellwood, Robert, "Occult Movements in America," in *The Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience* (New York: Scribner, 1988), 2:711.

10. John Lash, *The Seeker's Handbook: A Complete Guide to Spiritual Pathfinding* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990), 161.

11. Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 49.

12. Numbers have special meaning in the occult, from the most ancient times. The number 42 has powerful occult significance, as it is a multiple of both the mystic numbers 3 and 7. The number forty-two comes up repeatedly in religious and occult writing. Matt. 1:17, for instance, specifies forty-two generations between Abraham and Christ.

13. Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy or Magic*, ed. Willis Whitehead (Chicago: Hahn and Whitehead, 1898), 34.

14. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, in *The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed F. S. Boas (New York: Gordian Books, 1932), 5:60.

15. Frances A. Yates's *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972) contains the complete text of the *Fama* and includes excellent background material.

16. Israel Regardé, a member in the early twentieth century, wrote a description of the society's rites titled *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*.
17. Tzvetan Tudorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach for a Literary Genre*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.
18. *Ibid.*, 33.
19. The *Indiana Jones* films are the result of a conversation between Lucas and Spielberg on a beach in Hawaii, where both were on family vacations. In an interview, Lucas reports that Spielberg had said he wanted to do a James Bond-type film, and when Lucas described his Indiana Jones concept, they agreed to combine their ideas for a Bond style adventure with occult elements and a 1940s ambience. See *The Directors—Take Four*, ed. Robert J. Emery (New York: Allworth Press, 2003), 53.
20. Peter Levendra, *Unholy Alliance: A History of Nazi Involvement with the Occult*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 77.
21. The tale of the Spear is interesting enough to frame the made-for-TV movie *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear* (2004), which scrambles the story of Longinus's Spear with Egyptology, Mayan myth, Buddhist mysticism, and a jumble of other faux occultism. It also turns up in the recent film *Constantine*, discussed in chapter 3.
22. Trevor Ravenscroft, *The Spear of Destiny: The Occult Power Behind the Spear Which Pierced the Side of Christ* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 225.
23. Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, *The Morning of the Magicians*, trans. Rollo Meyers (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 173.
24. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Chapter 15 of *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).
25. Levendra, *Unholy Alliance*, 12.
26. God issues instructions on building the Ark and its sanctuary in Ex. 25:28.
27. W. H. Moreland and Atal Chandra Chatterjee, *A Short History of India*, Vol. 1 (New York: David McKay, 1957), 336.
28. The stones are suggestive of the Tzohar, the stones in which, according to Jewish lore in the Midrash, God imprisoned some of the original light of creation. The rabbis, reasoning from the fact that God commands "let there be light" on the first day while creating the sun later, believed that He had imprisoned some of the original light in a stone called the Tzohar, which was given to Adam after the expulsion and passed down to all of the patriarchs and which carried occult power, including divination. See Howard Schwartz, *The Tree of Souls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85–88. One might speculate that Spielberg, whose films often highlight his ethnic and religious background, would know of the stone of light.
29. See Levendra, *Unholy Alliance*, chapter 7, for details.
30. Lynn Picknet and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).
31. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzifal*, trans. Edwin Zeydel (New York: Continuum, 1991), 124.
32. Stephen Greenblatt, "Introduction," *Genre* 13 (1982): 6.
33. Michael Wood, *America at the Movies: Or "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 16.
34. Joseph Gixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty* (London: Routledge, 1989), 3, 5.

## CHAPTER 2. "IT IS THE DAWNING"

1. Gerome Ragni and James Rado, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 4.

2. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in Our Time* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980), 23.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838," in *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 1:128.
4. Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *Essays*, 1:269.
5. Shirley MacLaine, *Dancing in the Light* (New York: Bantam, 1985), III.
6. Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *Essays*, 2:45.
7. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 19.
8. J. Gordon Melton, "New Thought and the New Age," in Lewis and Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age*, 18.
9. Andrea Grace Diem and James R. Lewis, "Imagining India: The Influence of Hinduism on the New Age Movement," in Lewis and Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age*, n. 4, 303.
10. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 1.
11. Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder: Essays on Modern Science Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Advent, 1996), 11.
12. George Gallop, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1989). The ARDA Web site cites the Baylor Religion Survey with an even higher number for belief in angels, 16.2 percent "probably" and 61.3 percent "absolutely."
13. Lash, *The Seeker's Handbook*, 59–62.
14. Walter Robinson, "The Far East of Star Wars," in *Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful than You Can Imagine*, ed. Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 29.
15. Andrews Gordon, "Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time," in Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred*, 82.
16. Emerson, "The Oversoul," in *Essays*, 1: 269.
17. Francis Mossé, "T. M. in the Heartland." Maharishi University. <http://learntm.com-learn-about-transcendental-meditation.htm>.
18. James Redfield, *The Tenth Insight* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 42.
19. Contemporary cell studies include analysis of mitochondrian elements that produce adenosine triphosphate, the source of cellular energy. Madeline d'Engle's 1973 novel *A Wind in the Door* places the action at the cellular level of her child hero, Charles Wallace, whose mitochondria, which are part of the great cosmic dance, are dying. The word is spelled differently in Lucas's script, which is reproduced at <http://www.blueharvest.net>.
20. Dalai Lama, "Om Mani Padmi Hum," <http://www.circle-of-light.com/mantra/om-mantra.html>.
21. John Baxter, *Mythmaker: The Life and Work of George Lucas* (New York: Avon, 1999), 164.
22. Robinson, "The Far East of Star Wars," 30–31.
23. Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), 320.
24. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1988), 235.
25. The word *apocryphal* has come to describe something dubious or spurious. But the origin of the word *apocrypha* comes from theology, where the Apocrypha are those works from ancient Judaism or Christianity that are not admitted to the Old and New Testament canon.

44. The novel goes into much more detail about Hoover's life in India, where he lived with a poor family, all of whom were killed in a flood.

45. Tudorov, *The Fantastic*, 31.

46. Adrian Schrober, "East Meets West: Representing the Possessed Child in Frank de Felitta's/Robert Wise's *Audrey Rose*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2004): 62.

47. MacLaine, *Out on a Limb*, 200–201.

48. Lash, *The Seeker's Handbook*, 376.

49. Raymond Moody, *The Light Beyond* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 2.

50. MacLaine, *Out on a Limb*, 111.

51. Melton defines the aura as "an emanation said to surround human beings, chiefly encircling the head and supposed to proceed from the nervous system. It is described as a cloud of light suffused by various colors" (J. Gordon Melton, "Aura," in Vol. 1 of the *Encyclopedia of the Occult and Parapsychology*, 4th ed., ed. J. Gordon Melton [Detroit: Gale Research, 1996]). Auras are much discussed in literature of the New Age, and aura photographs with readings are standard features of shops specializing in New Age materials. The aura's colors are supposed to represent different aspects of the person, ranging from health to animal and spiritual nature.

52. Eileen Campbell and J. H. Brennan, "Akashic Record," in *Body, Mind and Spirit: A Dictionary of New Age Ideas, People, Places, and Terms* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1994).

53. Peter Thompkins and Christopher Bird, Chapter 1 in *The Secret Life of Plants* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). Thompkins and Bird provide a full, if perhaps somewhat sensationalized, account of Backster's remarkable experiments.

54. See G. R. S. Mead, *Simon Magus* (Chicago: Ares, 1979) for a collection of ancient writings about Simon.

55. Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 71.

56. Charlotte Smith, "St. Monica," in *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 302–303.

57. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

58. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, "Gaia," in *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

59. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 29.

60. *Ibid.*, 389.

61. Christine Hoff Kraemer, "Between the Worlds: Liminality and Self-Sacrifice in *Princess Mononoke*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1, no. 1 (2004): 1–5.

62. Ralph Abraham, *Chaos, Gaia, Eros: A Chaos Pioneer Uncovers the Three Great Streams of History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 5.

63. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Memories of Earliest Childhood," in *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. E. de Selincourt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 4: 284.

64. Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *Ibid.*, 2: 260.

65. Patrick K. Dooley, "The Prodigal Son Parable and Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*," *Renaissance Essays on Values in Literature* 58 (2005): 168.

66. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," 2: 262.

67. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1958), 1: 106–7.

68. Lash, *The Seeker's Handbook*, 276.

69. In angelology, cherubim are one of the nine orders of angels, which also in-

24. Brunas, Brunas, and Weaver, *Universal Horrors*, 83.
25. Beaumont earned his real claim to fame playing Ward Cleaver (note the irony of the first name) in the 1950s. *Leave It to Beaver* TV series.
26. Medway, *Lure of the Sinister*, 12–15.
27. J. P. Telotte, *Dreams of Darkness* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1985), 78.
28. *The Devil Rides Out* offers only the barest bones of the novel, which abounds in occult lore, both historical and made up by Wheatley. The film is set exclusively in England, while the novel's characters roam from England, to France, and to Greece in a finale that owes much to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Also, the novel's plot hinges on the Talisman of Set, a dried and desiccated penis that Mocata needs to gain the full occult power he seeks, a detail omitted from the film.
29. Margo Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: Scribners, 1988), 152.
30. Wheatley probably references a story in Campbell's *Tales of the West Highlands*, in which an orphan boy from Appin outfoxes a demon who wants him to sign the book and brings it home.
31. Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993), 156.
32. Christopher Lee, *Lord of Misrule: The Autobiography of Christopher Lee* (London: Orion, 2003).
33. Anton Lavey, *Satanic Rituals* (New York: Avon, 1976), 181–93.
34. Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Club Dumas*, trans. Sonia Soto (New York: Vintage International, 1998), 216.
35. It is worth noting that the film uses only about half of the wonderfully inter-textual novel on which it is based. Allusions abound in the novel, but the central one is the plot of *The Three Musketeers*, with parallel characters and incidents. Ironically, the book's Dumas plot turns out to be a splendidly developed Hitchcockian maguffin. We are led to believe incidents are important but then find they were irrelevant; and while Corso solves the riddle of *The Nine Gates to the Kingdom of Shadows*, he does not seek Lucifer.
36. Lucy Fisher, "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*," in Grant, *Dread of Difference*, 413.
37. In a bit of historical irony, soon after its release, bad things happened to those who made the film. Director Roman Polanski's wife, Sharon Tate, was brutally murdered by the Manson cult, themselves a Satanic group. Twelve years after the film was released, the shooting location, the Dakota Hotel, was the source of a famous murder. John Lennon was killed just outside.
38. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 122.
39. Anna Powell, "'Something Came Leaking Out': Carpenter's Unholy Abominations," in Conrich and Woods, *The Cinema of John Carpenter*, 142.
40. Muir finds that "the plague of evil which overcomes the graduate students in St. Godard's is an allegory for the AIDS virus." AIDS was much in the news at the time the film was made. John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 141.
41. Marie Mulvey-Roberts, "'A Spook Ride on Film': Carpenter and the Gothic," in Conrich and Woods, *The Cinema of John Carpenter*, 81.
42. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, 111.
43. Robin Baker, *The Science of Sex: Sperm Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xiv.
44. The graphic novel character first appeared in a bit part for the D.C. *Swamp*

20. Douglas Winter, "Opera of Violence: The Films of Dario Argento," in *Cut: Horror Writers on Horror Film*, ed. Christopher Golden (New York: Berkeley Books, 1992), 266.
21. Dennis Fischer, *Horror Film Directors, 1931–1990*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1991), 25.
22. Adam Knee, "Gender, Genre, Argento," in Grant, *Dread of Difference*, 216.
23. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 21.
24. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.
25. Christopher Lee, *Lord of Misrule*, 306.
26. Steven Sutcliffe, "Religion in *The Wicker Man*: Context and Representation," in *Constructing the Wicker Man*, ed. Jonathan Murray et al., 36–53 (Glasgow: Crichton Publications, 2005).
27. David Bartholomew, "The Wicker Man," *Cinefantastique* 6, no. 4 (1977): 12.
28. The scene combines "the King must die" motif of folk myth with the ancient Scottish tradition of the burning of a sacrifice in a wicker enclosure. According to folklorist Maclain McDonald, "In those days, the community or the chief would arbitrarily decide who was going to be the sacrificial wicker man for that year," usually some undesirable. Then this person would be lured into the wicker man structure and burned alive (see <http://www.tartans.com/articles/wickerman.html>). The tradition of the wicker man is still observed in Scotland as what is an apparently commercialized festival.
29. LaBute includes various puns or homages to the 1973 film, for instance, giving his hero the name Edward and his daughter the last name Woodward, equaling the name of the actor who plays Sergeant Howie in the original.
30. In Tony Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 48.
31. *Ibid.*, 57–58.
32. Fish, *Is There a Text*, 13.
33. John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 57 and 75.
34. *Ibid.*, 305.
35. *Ibid.*, 183.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, chapter 4, "Creating Sacred Space."
38. *Ibid.*, 12.
39. *Ibid.*, 128.
40. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 112.
41. Alice Hoffman, *Practical Magic* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1958), 160.
42. See Carrol L. Fry, "The Goddess Ascending: Neo-Pagan Feminism in Marian Zimmer Bradley's Novels," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1963): 67–81.
43. Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence: Studies in the Sociology of Film* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1974), 135.

## CHAPTER 5. "I SEE DEAD PEOPLE"

1. *Hamlet*, in *Shakespeare, the Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 1.4.40–44. References are to act, scene, and line.

2. Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, in *The Works of Henry Fielding* (New York: George D. Sprout, 1903), 4:153.
3. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, for a thorough discussion of pre-Spiritualist practices and beliefs.
4. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Gist of Swedenborg*, comp. Julian K. Smyth and William Wunsch (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1926), 12.
5. Quoted in Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life after Death* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
6. See, for instance, part 3, chapters 8 and 9 of Howe's book *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism* (London: Virtue and Company, 1877) in which he castigates fake mediums who use these tricks that Robert Browning had attributed to him.
7. George Anderson and Andrew Barone, *Walking in the Garden of Souls* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2002), 100–101.
8. Viewers might be puzzled at the title, since the film has no character named Joe. Parish speculates that the screenwriter might allude to a contemporary and well publicized remark from General Claire Chennault: "When I'm behind the stick, I'm just a guy named Joe" (*Ghosts and Angels*, 155).
9. This line suggests a New Age version of the rhetorical antithesis from the Gospel (repeated in different passages of Matthew and Luke): "He that findeth his life, shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39).
10. Sylvia Browne, *Life on the Other Side* (New York: New American Library, 2002), 56.
11. Campbell and Brennan, *Body, Mind and Spirit*, 7. Various seemingly reliable witnesses report Home's ability to apport objects and even levitate.
12. Anderson and Barone, *Walking in the Garden of Souls*, 93.
13. Browne, *Life on the Other Side*, 61.
14. *Ibid.*, 63. Early Spiritualists were quite divided on the issue of reincarnation, with a division between Spiritism, which originated from the teachings of Allan Kardec, and Spiritualism. A basic difference between the two camps was the Spiritists' insistence on reincarnation leading to perfection and most Spiritualists' denial of this concept.
15. Browne, *Life on the Other Side*, 63.
16. Katherine A. Fowkes, "Melodramatic Specters: Cinema and *The Sixth Sense*," in *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 190.
17. Tom Butler and Lisa Butler, *There Is No Death and There Are No Dead* (Reno, Nev.: AA-EVP Publishing, 2003), 76–82. Often these calls are related to the "crisis apparition" phenomenon, a telephone call or visitation to a loved one from the spirit of a person who has just died. Deborah Blum in *Ghost Hunters* reports that William James and his fellow researchers were able to verify so many of these events that they accepted them as valid.
18. Arthur Conan Doyle, *History of Spiritualism* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 281.
19. Gary Zukov, *The Seat of the Soul* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 184.
20. *Ibid.*, 183–84.
21. Allison DuBois, *Don't Kiss Them Good-bye* (Phoenix, Ariz.: π Press, 2004), 9. DuBois is the real-life medium on whom the TV series *Medium* is based.
22. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Edge of the Unknown* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), 84.
23. Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 176. Langford states that Sadako's (and later Samara's) ap-

43. Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005), 188.
44. David Lund, *Death and Consciousness* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985), 120.
45. Doyle, *The New Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), 88.
46. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 260.
47. Anderson and Barone, *Walking in the Garden of Souls*, 67–68.
48. Browne, *The Other Side and Back: A Psychic's Guide to Our World and Beyond* (New York: Dutton, 1999), 15–16.
49. Gary D. Schwartz, with William Simon, *The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life after Death* (New York: Pocket Books, 2002), 65.
50. Anthony Borgia, *Life in the World Unseen* (New York: Citadel Press, 1957), 80.
51. Doyle, *The New Revelation*, 170.
52. See especially chapter 7 of Sylvia Browne's *The Other Side and Back*.
53. Katherine A. Fowkes, *Giving up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 138.
54. *Shakespeare, the Complete Works*.
55. William McDonald, *Spiritualism: Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft* (New York: Nelson and Philips, 1866), 53.

## CHAPTER 6. "THIS ROUGH MAGIC"

1. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), 83.
2. Marcus Bach, *Strange Altars* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1952), 33.
3. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 30. Lurid tales of sacrifice by followers of Santeria are based on their sacrifice of animals during ceremonies to the Orishas (their version of the Loas). In 1992, a Supreme Court decision declared that prohibition of such actions by devotees violated the freedom of religion clause of the Constitution.
4. Bach, *Strange Alters*, 79.
5. W. B. Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1929), 94.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Telotte, *Dreams of Darkness*, 53.
8. Alexander Nemerov, *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Home Front Pictures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 103.
9. Seabrook, *Magic Island*, 103.
10. Nicolas Kiessling, *The Incubus in English Literature: Provenance and Progeny* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1977), 14.
11. Rossell Hope Robbins, "Incubus," in *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959).
12. Robert Ellwood, "UFO Religious Movements," in Miller, *America's Alternative Religions*, 396.
13. J. Gordon Melton, "The Contactees: A Survey," in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 9.
14. Susan Jean Palmer, "Women in the Raelian Movement: New Religious Experiments in Gender and Authority," in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 107.
15. Ryan T. Cook, "U. F. O. Religions," in *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 359.



16. Caron Schwartz Ellis, "Space Aliens as Sky Gods," in Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred*, 84.

17. Both quotations are from Gary Westfahl, *Science Fiction Quotations from the Inner Mind to the Outer Limits* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

18. The signal goes toward Saturn in the novel, but apparently the special effects technology was not yet ripe to visually portray the rings of the planet.

19. It is surely no accident that the letters HAL precede the letters IBM.

20. Neil McAleer, *Arthur Clarke: The Authorized Biography* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1992), 185.

21. Michael E. Thron, "The Outsider from Inside: Clarke's Aliens," in *Arthur C. Clarke*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (New York: Taplinger, 1977), 73.

22. Muir, *Films of John Carpenter*, 123.

23. W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 654.

24. Matthew Alper, *The God Part of the Brain* (New York: Rogue Press, 2001), 81.

25. Redfield, *The Tenth Insight*, 114.

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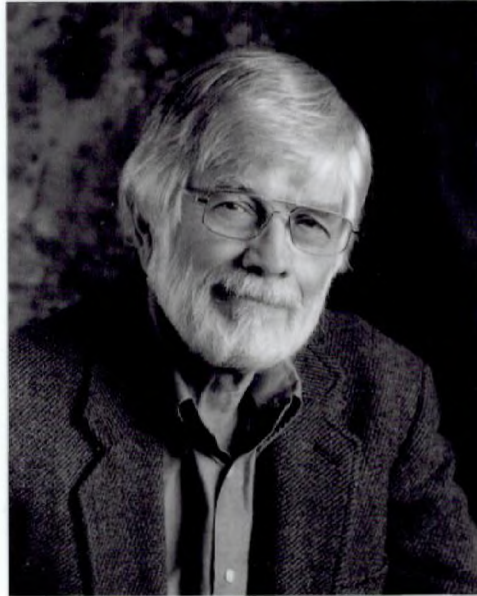
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