



THE SCREEN

The trouble with me, I'm beginning to realize, is that all I expect to see in a movie theater is a movie. I'm not the right audience for a phenomenon. I lack a certain credulousness that's needed. When *The Exorcist's* twelve-year old heroine Regan (Linda Blair) levitates four feet above her bed, possessed by demons, I can't stop myself from noticing that the piano wires quiver with strain in the shadows. Got no soul, I guess. Clearly, though, most of the people flocking to *The Exorcist* pay those piano wires no attention. All over the country the film has caused movie-goers to lose their grip on reality. People have been so afflicted by terror that they threw up or fainted, and priests from Denver to New Jersey report being sought out by those the film has deranged. It all makes me wonder whether I ought to review *The Exorcist* or try to exorcise it.

I suppose that, having earned the testimonial implied by such a strong public reaction to the film, director William Friedkin should be given his due. He has tried something which, however unimaginative it may be, is still difficult, and apparently he has succeeded. The difficulty of making this film was that in it the line between naturalism and supernaturalism has to be, like those piano wires, hard to see. The audience has to be gulled into accepting the latter as if it were the former. In this regard, the keystone of the film is not any of those scenes where Regan is actually being exorcised, spewing bile and growling blasphemies, but much earlier when doctors think her fits result from a brain lesion. In scenes where her brain is being X-rayed, Friedkin depicts with documentary explicitness the injection and insertion into her neck of probes for a spinal tap. As she cringes with pain, enormous machines lurch and clank with a mechanical vengeance more horrific than anything unseen spirits have done to her so far.

It's at this point, I suspect, that Friedkin gets the audience in his power, perhaps more completely than he ever expected or wanted to. These scenes are so graphically done that they dispose the audience to be a bit queasy—they "prepare" for what's coming in a sense—but there's more to their effectiveness than just a gut reaction. On the X-ray table Regan seems a type of some fundamental modern condition in man. Her position at the hands of reassuring doctors is more helpless and terrifying than the fate of the prisoner in Kafka's penal colony. The effect is that the leap from the agonies of modern medicine to those of ancient religion becomes, in the mind of the audience, more than just believable: it becomes desirable, and that is what enables Friedkin to make it. When goodness must be

experienced with such intense pain as Regan's to oppose an evil whose very existence is in doubt—indeed the X-rays do not turn up any brain damage—life becomes unbearable. It's enough to make you nostalgic for the Devil.

Thus Friedkin has been a Dr. Frankenstein of sorts. His own accomplishment is purely a technical one. He has tinkered with the lighting on his main set, a town-house, until it is low and luxurious, and shades off almost imperceptibly into something murky and sinister near the ceilings, where the demons moan and scratch. He has in effect shaded off everything that he can get us to take at face value, and that way he has hoped we will take the rest too. Yet the scenes detailing Regan's possession aren't any cleverer than the chase in *The French Connection*, which they closely resemble in editing and pacing. What is the source of this film's power? It is as if, once Friedkin had created the film, it took on a life of its own. He has gotten his audience to accept something that affects people profoundly, but what?

In the end it isn't Regan but the exorcist himself whom the demons take possession of. Actually there are two exorcists, Father Karras (Jason Miller) and Father Merrin (Max von Sydow). Karras is a young psychiatrist filled with guilt about having neglected his dying mother and with doubt about his vocation as a priest. Merrin is an old man, an archaeologist, whom we have seen only one other time, at the film's beginning when he finds at a dig in Iran a Zoroastrian talisman together with, inexplicably, a Christian medal. But we have seen the talisman since then, near where a man fell out Regan's window to his death, and now we see the medal again around Karras' neck.

Since both priests die in the attempt to exorcise Regan, the implication is that everything that has happened was fated, and fated with prescience by Satan himself. The possession of Regan only ends when Karras momentarily loses control, screaming in exasperation, "Take me instead! Take me!" He at once blanches the same ashen color as Regan, and as she finally returns to her senses he is hurled through her window to his death. The revelation at hand would seem to be that Regan never was anything more than a decoy, a baited trap. It was Karras the demons were after all along, and they got him.

The Catholic Conference's Division of Film and Broadcasting has rated this film A-4, which means that it is not morally objectionable but may "confuse or offend" some people. This surprises me somewhat because Karras' final succumbing to the demons seems a gesture that affirms the power of evil in the total absence of good. It is Karras' desperate escape from the maddening dis-ease of apostasy. Nothing has happened that restores his faith in God, but Regan's possession at least confirms the existence of the Devil. In

a choice between apostasy and damnation, the only choice he has, Karras chooses damnation. His death has to be seen in such religious terms too, not in humanistic ones, because his scant relationships with Regan and Father Merrin don't provide sufficient motive for what he does. If he couldn't bring himself to some humane response when his mother was dying, we can't believe he does so now out of compassion for virtual strangers. No, it isn't for love of man that Karras acts any more than it is for love of God. In the end he hasn't found anything he can sacrifice himself for, but only something he can sacrifice himself to.

The vanquishing hero of this movie, then, is the Devil. Among the people who freak out at the film, a great many are reportedly lapsed Catholics, apostates

who, I would presume, identify with Karras. The logical conclusion to draw is that they also sympathize with the way out that he takes. Many of these people are the ones who seek out a priest, claiming that they too are possessed and want exorcism. But I can't help suspecting it is just an absolute certainty like exorcism's failure that they really hope to achieve. Whatever the case, this doesn't exactly suggest a sanguine prospect for the Church. Contrary to the Catholic Conference's fears, these people haven't been confused by *The Exorcist* in the least. They have understood the film all too well—have understood it almost instinctively, it would seem. Perhaps it really is exorcising that the film demands rather than reviewing.

COLIN L. WESTERBECK, JR.

BOOKS

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR., ALCHEMIST

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On the wine-bibber's O-7 vintage rating scale, this is an indifferent offering, at most a 3. Swirled and sniffed in the glass of contemplation, the words lack bouquet. On tasting, this conservative fermentation gives unmistakable signs of aging poorly in the bottle. Fair is fair. From time to time flashes of the old Buckley insolence light the page. The baroque vocabulary does not cease to amaze. Where save in the writings of our hero is one regaled with words like *prescind*, *etiolated*, *decoct*, *anfractuosity*, *eristic*, and *thaumaturgic*? I can't believe that either friend or foe will be content with these small helpings of old delights.

As a student of welfare and taxation Buckley is manifestly uncomfortable with the masses of data he offers in evidence. Some mistakes are trivial: a possible increase in subway fares from 15¢ to 60¢ is a 300 per cent not 400 per cent leap, and quite bad enough when correctly stated. Some errors are more substantial: when

median family income approaches \$12,000, it is highly implausible that "91 per cent of all taxable income is in brackets of less than \$10,000." Other lapses are conceptually disastrous: the author's laborious "proof" that poor states subsidize rich ones is based upon examination of federal grants-in-aid to cities and states. If the Pentagon's far from inconsiderable spending were included, Buckley would have been comforted by the size of the funds flowing to poor southern states in abiding testimonial to the political clout of southern Senators and Congressmen. I don't know who subsidizes whom but one certainly can't derive the answer from Buckley. Again, although Buckley cites valuable tax research by Joseph Pechman and his Brookings colleagues, he oversimplifies their findings, to put the matter courteously, when he flatly asserts that the rich bear heavier tax burdens than the middle class. It may be that, innocently he focuses upon rates imposed upon adjusted gross income. It is axiomatic that the main function of skilled tax professionals is so to shelter the income of their clients as to reduce adjusted gross income to the most modest amount legally possible.

This sort of thing is bound to shake one's confidence in Mr. Buckley as a guide through the quantitative jungles. I fear that worse must yet be said. Serious conservatives respect the complexity of institutional arrangements and gaze skeptically upon simple schemes advertised as improvements of existing arrangements. Yet all four of Buckley's reforms amount to magical (dare I say *thaumaturgic*?) remedies for appallingly complex and chronic social ailments. Welfare, says Buckley, is too expensive. The thing to do then is limit federal aid to those states whose per capita income falls below the national average, a neat exclusion of New York and California which harbor the largest welfare clientele. Almost frivolously neglected are the reasons for migration of the poor to the cities, evidence that most of the welfare population are too unskilled and uneducated to be employable, and signs that of the remainder work would gladly be performed if only jobs were available. Since welfare recipients like the rest of us are citizens of the United States as well as of a given state, there seems to be no valid reason to define their plight as merely local. The problem is national.