

The Crucible of Goodness

Modern Horror as a Vehicle for the Christian Worldview

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Abstract

The horror genre has undergone drastic changes in the last two hundred years. Its landscape has transformed from brooding Gothic castles and haunted family drama and intrigue to the unfathomable realms of space, and the endless nothingness of evil incarnate. Modern horror in particular reveals the psyche of current human anxieties and mindsets, and how radically these mindsets differ from those of histories past. Underlying it all, unbeknownst to most fans of the genre, is a distinct and absolutely Christian origin; indeed, this paper will present argument that modern horror as it exists would never be possible without the influence of Christianity's unique and pervasive worldview, and the differences that exist therein from earlier pagan mythos. It will analyze particular current releases in literature and film, and show how modern horror is expressing, expanding and continuing the longevity of Christian attitudes towards death, evil-as-nothingness, anti-pagan sentiment, and the separation of man not only from the center of his universe, but from the very numinous characteristics of existence.



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The Crucible of Goodness

Modern horror in both literature and film is a breed of expression all its own. Over the centuries, it has undergone more mutations than a mad scientist's runaway doomsday virus, moving from the Gothic and Victorian traditions of isolated hauntings and tragic lunatics to the realms of global annihilation and besiegement by constant evil from the stars, the shadows, and every dark corner of the human mind. These earlier areas of horror held room for escape, confined as they were to the haunted house or castle, or to the lives of a particular doomed individual who had the misfortune to stumble across something otherworldly. The past century has presented horror themes in which there is no escape; the "closed space" of our chaotic and unforgiving existence is tightening ever closer. What casual explorers of the horror genre may not realize is how many of their beloved escapes into a safe realm of experienced terror originate from a source that would never consider itself the mother of horror: Christianity.

This paper will attempt to show, by way of several examples in film and literature, the common thematic elements running throughout the modern expressions of the genre and their Christian-based origins. This is not to say that these elements are not expressions *solely* of a Christian worldview, for many of them can also be read as expressions of unique modern sociological anxieties, such as increased globalization as a threat to national identity and life after the invention of the atom bomb. Human fears are as complex as they are numerous. But this paper will offer an interpretation of "literature as a replacement for religion", and demonstrate that a great many of modern American anxieties and fears have taken root thanks to seeds planted long ago by Christianity, a unique and world-shattering perspective on the supernatural and its relationship to mankind. In his work *Terrors of Uncertainty*, Joseph Gixti sums up the role of horror fiction by way of quoting one of its greatest authors, Stephen King: "It bears noting... that among the claims made for horror fiction by one of its foremost contemporary exponents is the assertion that its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands, and that the finest representatives of the genre tell us truths about ourselves by telling us lies about people who never existed."¹ In the view of this paper, Christianity has established the majority of the "virtues of the norm" and thus the "taboo lands" into which the horror genre ventures.

¹ Joseph Gixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty* (London: Routledge), 5.

The Ancient World and the Creation of Evil

The ancient worldview of humanity concerning the Numinous was one of a decidedly reflective nature. Humans knew that they could will things to happen, and created gods in their image, gods who also willed things to happen.² Thus natural events that today can be explained mostly by science were, in that oldest of worldviews, merely an expression of the willfulness of deities far more powerful than we. A mountain was set ablaze and torn asunder because a Below God was furious at being rejected by a beautiful maiden;³ Athens was nearly flooded because Poseidon had long been feuding with its patron, Athena, who of course swooped in and minimized the tsunami's damage to her beautiful city⁴. (Events now explained by science as the volcanic eruption and creation of Crater Lake in Oregon, and the tsunami likely caused by the eruption of Mount Thera in the Aegean, respectively.)

Ancient people were far from ignorant, they only lacked the tools and technology we today take for granted in formulating our explanations of events. Thus pagan pantheons were not full of evil, savage, backwards debauchery as many in the Western world think. They were elaborate systems of explanation meant to give humanity some form of control and understanding over a world that, at times, seemed determined to wipe them from existence. The beautiful mythology of these pantheons served as an oral pipeline of deadly important information in a time when literacy was rare or nonexistent.⁵ Unlike today, religion actually was an arguable necessity in determining the survival of a civilization; pantheons and mythology based in astronomical observance, for example, determined the proper time for crop planting and harvesting.⁶ In ancient Etruria, religion had no relationship to salvation or damnation: the world was only a visual representation of a fatalistic cosmic order that could not be swayed or bribed by mankind, but could only hope to be understood through careful observation and interpretation, giving humans some semblance of future expectations, some potential to side-step a disaster heading their way.⁷ A

² Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 41-42.

³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178- 179.

⁷ Jean-René Jannot, *Religion in Ancient Etruria* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2005), 10.

The Crucible of Goodness

misread of these myths-- or in their view, a misread of the will of their gods-- could spell disaster for an entire population.

The rise of Christianity was a devastating change to these practices. The effect of transitioning to a monotheistic worldview had long-reaching effects to far more than the literal pantheon. In the ancient world view, the spirit world in its many forms (henceforth referred to as the Numinous) was accessible in endless ways by every single human, regardless of his station or occupation. Contact with the Numinous was an accepted life experience, and indeed a necessary one to avert catastrophe. Christianity altered this worldview by condensing all gods to one, and most of all, by attributing to this god the characteristics of a perfect and entirely well-meaning deity, a deity whose creation very much ripped any semblance of control away from mankind. Where once deities were accessible by minor rituals and understandable through their sheer human nature, now replacing them is perfection incarnate, a deity who created all of existence as a benevolent gesture, and whose existence is too great for mere mortals to comprehend or behold. Generally speaking, adherents of Christianity contact God not directly but through intercessors: his chosen prophets, priests, patron saints, or through his human-cum-deified son Jesus Christ. Human beings are naturally alienated from such a creature, because we are far from perfect, and because the machinations of existence are even today far outside our scope of understanding. It goes without saying that the creation of intercessors was also extremely isolating, especially when abuse of the power of these positions comes into play. Suddenly God is not only unreachable, but potentially indifferent or even hostile to suffering, if the behavior of his chosen church guardians is to be fairly judged. Where for thousands of years before, man had been able to listen to some form of divine voice in his everyday world, now abruptly there is only a cold silence answering his pleas.

So too was nature alienated, although far more subtly, from the Numinous through this attribution. When an earthquake or a flood destroys a civilization, the Christian worldview is suddenly in an uncomfortable position as it attempts to explain why a benevolent deity would wipe out his favorite creations. In *City of God*, timeless philosopher Augustine offers his perspective, declaring that "no nature is at all evil", and that attributing such a description to nature is a fault of our perception: "Divine providence admonishes us not foolishly to vituperate things, but to investigate their utility with care, and where our mental

capacity or infirmity is at fault, to believe that there is a utility, hidden throughout.”⁸ In short, the believer must hold to the faith that, even in the face of seemingly senseless destruction, Providence—God’s benevolent plan—is always at play. This is often an emotionally unsatisfactory explanation, and opened a chasm through which the concept of pure evil was allowed to flow: for if God and his created nature are not evil, but evil still has a presence in our world, then this evil must be coming from some outside, darker place⁹. Humans could no longer look at a volcanic eruption or ruinous earthquake as some sort of battle between deities (leaving one of them, usually, in the role of mankind’s champion, as Athena was to Athens in the aforementioned tsunami). They had only one deity now, creator of the destruction, assuring them this is all part of a plan they simply cannot comprehend. Even His archenemy Lucifer is really no match for God;¹⁰ there are no intercessors to protect mankind from the plans of this deity, no Prometheus to the Christian God as Zeus. Saints and even Jesus himself are as subject to God’s ultimate Providence as the rest of humanity. Though unable to act as an intercessor on mankind’s behalf, Lucifer serves an entirely different purpose. For attributing this destruction to God is a difficult philosophical prospect; attributing it to dark outside forces that, while powerful, will never truly overcome God, is much more comfortable.

This concept of pure evil as it exists in our modern worldview could not have come about without Christianity’s belief in an entirely benevolent deity. Today we have endless examples in popular culture of the expression of pure evil and the affirmation of its existence. But pure evil was created only to fill a vacuum left by the Christian worldview, which pulled the Numinous away from the access of mankind which can no longer fathom or understand its processes, and left it with scant few explanations for many of the realities of the universe and human existence.¹¹ As Augustine states, we cannot blame a perfect, benevolent deity for death and disasters, as it is all “part of the plan.” Thus agents of this plan began to take form: demons and other dark spirits, the coagulated energy of hate and malice and suffering. In the Christian worldview, they exist neither within our realm nor within God’s, but in their own shadowed underworld, a realm of pure anguish, the Christian Hell. They are God’s perfect scapegoats when evil occurs in the world.

⁸ Augustine, *City of God* Book 12 (<http://carm.org/augustine-city-of-god-book-12>).

⁹ Manuel Aguirre, *The Closed Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 30-32.

¹⁰ Rev 12:7, 8, 9; 20:1-10 KJV.

¹¹ Aguirre, *The Closed Space*, 30-32, 40.

The Crucible of Goodness

And though their creation was not an act of God, but an act of the powerful human mind to answer the questions Christianity left unanswered (and, arguably, never intended to answer), they have since fulfilled their role within Christianity's canon as another of God's agents who, despite their terrible means, serve the same glorious end. In William Peter Blatty's novel *The Exorcist*, the eponymous hero Father Merrin confirms as much to troubled priest Father Karras, whose faith in God is shaken even as he looks into the face of His enemy: "Perhaps evil is the crucible of goodness... and perhaps even Satan - Satan, in spite of himself - somehow serves to work out the will of God."¹² It's all a part of the plan, though the question of why a benevolent God would bother creating purely evil creatures to put his plan into motion is one that Christianity has yet to answer. And as psychologists and philosophers would discover and echo in later centuries, "in negating what is part of it, this world becomes like what it negates...in different terms, what we negate about ourselves does not vanish: it becomes our negated-self, our non-being; and if Aquinas said: *malum est non ens*, it follows that our non-being is our evil."¹³

Creators of horror literature and film recognize this disparity, and in a way are striving to answer the question of what is evil, from where does it come, and what chance do we stand in the face of it? Aguirre posits that "horror" and "terror" stem from different experiences, the former being "facing the undesirable, the shocking, the revolting: a *confrontation* with evil"¹⁴, and the latter being "the experience of facing evil *plus* the 'surmise' of something more not directly perceived, a threat."¹⁵(emphasis his) Earlier generations of the genre were dedicated to the isolated confrontation of evil. But "...it has developed from a literature of isolated and localized confrontations with the dark Numinous to one where that which is confronted is recognized as the mere tip of an unfathomable iceberg of shadow, whose threat infinitely exceeds anything given to our experience in earlier stages. And the reason for this is that the literature of terror, as a faithful heir of a Christian tradition, has been working its way, unwittingly yet systematically, towards an apocalypse, a second coming, a millennium."¹⁶

¹² William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (New York: HarperCollins), 353.

¹³ Aguirre, *The Closed Space*, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

The following pages will explore some of the detailed ways in which Christianity has affected the way we think about evil and fear, and how these cultural expressions continue to regurgitate the ideals and propaganda of a Christian worldview, including anti-pagan sentiment, anti-intellectualism, and human sin as truest cause of and cry for salvation. First, we will examine a very old Christian mindset: the importance of feminine sexual purity.

The “Final Girl”

There are a number of recurring themes in modern horror that have their origin in Christian ideas about the world. One of the most consistent themes are from what are termed “slasher films”, which typically consist of a certain breed of a supernaturally endowed killer stalking a group of young people and murdering them horribly one by one; popular examples include John Carpenter’s *Halloween* starring a young Jaime Lee Curtis, which went on to become a twenty-year franchise, and the “Friday the 13th” franchise, whose icon Jason Voorhees is a chilling model of a bullied and murdered child come back for revenge. In these and numerous other examples from the genre, there is a common recurrence regarding who survives and who does not: typically, the survivor in a slasher film is female a disproportionate amount of the time,¹⁷ and she is also most often depicted as virginal and innocent when compared to the likes of her murdered cohorts. (The term “Final Girl” for this trope was coined by author Carol Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, wherein she explores this disparity through the glass of gender identity.) In the original “Friday the 13th”, the killer is not Jason, but his mother exacting revenge on camp counselors who, some decades earlier, were too busy having sex instead of monitoring the children under their charge, and Jason drowned in the lake thanks to their negligence. (Jason becomes the killer from then on out to avenge her death.) In *Halloween*, bookish and responsible Laurie Strode (Curtis) is tasked with the boring job of babysitting on Halloween, instead of partying and drinking with her girlfriends, who both wind up victims of Michael Myers’ rampage; one girl is killed after she tries to wiggle out of her own responsibility of babysitting by sending her child ward over to be watched by Laurie so she can meet up with her boyfriend, and the other is killed post-coitus, still naked, while she waits for her boyfriend to bring her beer.

¹⁷ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

The Crucible of Goodness

This commonality of the Final Girl is so ubiquitous it has inspired its own satire in the *Scream* franchise, movies that are part slasher, part dark comedy, exploiting popular horror tropes as *modus operandi* for their killers. In a particular scene, one of the main characters who is obsessed with horror films explains the “rules” one must abide by to survive a horror movie. His first rule: “You can never have sex.” Rule number two: “You can never drink or do drugs”, which he explains is “an extension of number one—it’s the sin factor.”

The sin factor is a telling description for this trope. The implication is that no matter what the murderer’s original motive or intentions, he will not be able to resist slaughtering a person who chooses to engage in any “sinful” behavior like drinking, drugs, or pre-marital sex—indeed the characters in these films are almost always teenagers or college-aged students; full-grown adults rarely seem punished by the same rules. This leads us back to the Final Girl, again usually a woman who has resisted numerous temptations from boys and friends. She takes the evil stalking them seriously, perhaps more seriously than her peers, to the point of being mocked for it (until those mocking her are, of course, murdered), showing resilience and self-sufficiency that is just shy of actual liberation.

This trope is a reflection of Christian ideals, particularly for women. It implies time and again that there is an evil in the world, stalking and waiting for people to sin, and as soon as they do, they are slaughtered. Only by remaining pure and innocent can a woman hope to evade these monsters. The reward of survival is handed down only to the Mother Mary, the repentant Magdalene. In *Halloween* especially, Laurie is presented as a traditional mother-figure, tending after children on a holiday night on which she should rightly be enjoying her youth; a night, it must be noted, which is associated in modern traditions with evil. She even takes in a second child when her friend decides she doesn’t want the responsibility of motherhood and turns the child over to Laurie, heading out for drinking and debauchery. The implication here seems to extend past the Final Girl and into a realm of traditional gender identities: bad mothers will be punished; women who give up their babies in some way for the enjoyments of single life will suffer. But the good mother, protective and pure, will find a way through the darkness for both herself and her offspring.

It is difficult to analyze this and not see allusions to Original Sin and the tale of the Garden of Eden.¹⁸ There are also shades of the Hebrew story of Lilith, the first wife of Adam who refused to be subjugated to a man and was cast out and made the mother of demons.¹⁹ A loss of innocence for a woman spells disaster in the Christian worldview, and not just for her, but for potentially everyone around her²⁰—in this instance, for the boys she tempts into bed, and for the friends she endangers by attracting psychopathic killers. Misbehave, they seem to say, and darkness will find you.

Sinister: From Deities to Demons

The 2012 film *Sinister* exhibits a great many examples of the paths which Christianity has directed modern horror. Actor Ethan Hawke stars as the protagonist Ellison Oswalt, a true crime writer looking for his first blockbuster book in a decade, who moves his family into a home which served as the backdrop to a brutal quadruple-homicide some years earlier. He is hoping to investigate the mysterious circumstances of the crime, as well as the disappearance of the youngest daughter of the murdered family. He finds a box of Super 8 film in the attic, each reel showcasing a snuff film, including one of the house's previous owners being hanged together by their necks from the tree in the backyard. He spies a ghoulish figure in each film standing watch, and is convinced he's found proof of a serial murderer. His investigating reveals the figure is in fact a representation of a pagan (Babylonian) deity named Bughuul, known in ancient times for slaughtering entire families in order to consume the souls of the children. Bughuul has long been known to live in or be able to appear from the images of himself, thus ancient representations of him are very rare; this explains the Super 8mm films as the ultimate source of his powers. Oswalt's attempt to destroy the films and thus Bughuul are unsuccessful, as the deity has already attached itself to his children, in particular his artistic daughter who begins painting pictures of "the boogey man." When he finally understands and tries to liberate his family from the danger, he unwittingly leads them right into it.

There are some obvious anti-pagan sentiments at work right away. Babylon and Sumer are popular choices in the genre for an obscure but

¹⁸ Gen. 3:14-24 KJV.

¹⁹ David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives in Hebrew Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

²⁰ Gen. 3:14-16 KJV.

The Crucible of Goodness

not altogether unknown pagan society where origins of evil deities are concerned. This is only possible thanks to modern Western ignorance of the complex religions of these societies, which, during Christianity's rise, were tossed in a general garbage pile of savage worldviews whose adherents were violent and evil; their deities have now become our demons. (In *The Exorcist*, the demonic spirit Pazuzu is also indicated to be of Babylonian origin.) The structure of polytheistic pantheons was in reality based on necessity of explanation, the belief in a Willful world, and on the importance of passing down information through mythology of said deities regarding astronomy, agriculture, and potential dangers to the society such as volcanic eruptions²¹. Under this light, one must beg the question: why would any society find need for a deity whose entire *modus operandi* is to murder families and eat the souls of their children? Surely this wasn't a crime being committed so often that it needed such a specific explanation, and evil as it exists as a concept in our modern worldview is a Christian construction, meaning these pantheons pre-dated the idea of pure evil. The tales of child killing/consuming is one that has been used time and again by Christians against competing religions like Judaism and various pagan worldviews.²² It is an extremely visceral and powerful propaganda to wield against an enemy.

The belief that Baghuul either lives within images of himself or can transport his spirit to these images is one that both predates and was adopted by Christianity. In the ancient worldview, the spirit world was considered a "reversal" of our world, accessible through things like mirrors, reflections in water, or rituals of reversal such as clothing the dead backwards.²³ Seeing one's reflection—an image of yourself—was equal to seeing your soul in the spirit world. Thus images of a deity were thought to act as vessels into which that deity could pour their spirit.²⁴ This is seen today in the Christian practice of venerating patron saints, a belief structure adopted from pagan Rome's practice of house or family spirits, separate from the public pantheon, whose death masks would hang prominently and be given offerings in exchange for protection.²⁵ Shrines to hundreds of different Christian saints can be found worldwide, as well as the corresponding stories that that saint has been seen or felt near her shrine, sometimes giving blessings to her faithful worshippers. It

²¹ Barber and Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky*, 9.

²² Alan Dundes, *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook In Anti-Semitic Folklore*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

²³ Barber and Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky*, 166-175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

is this very old belief that Bughuul exploits via Super 8mm film, a belief today that is strongly represented and re-enforced by Christianity.

Bughuul and Oswald also represent a certain dualism, with Bughuul acting as the “dark double” of this naïve crime writer.²⁶ Both characters are voyeuristic: it is revealed at film’s end that Bughuul himself did not kill these families *per sé*, but was merely the puppet master, watching over the work of a contracted murderer (revealed to be the missing and eventually consumed children from each family). Oswald exhibits these same types of traits as he becomes obsessed with the Super 8mm films, watching and re-watching these horrific crimes in hopes of uncovering clues.

Both characters profit from the crimes in question: Bughuul gets innocent child souls on which to feed, and Oswald gets the “scoop of the century” by solving a string of truly horrendous murders. There is a moment when Oswald realizes he’s found films of murders he’s never heard of, evidence that should rightly belong in the hands of law enforcement, and decides to keep the information to himself to enhance his book. In another light, Oswald’s actions could be understood, even defended, as general human curiosity and an attempt to assert whatever advantage he may have in his line of work to support his long-suffering family that has for years tolerated his obsessive chase of fame and glory. (After all, the crimes on the films were decades old, and he can still turn the evidence over after his book is finished). Were it not for Bughuul’s presence, his actions could have resulted in a massive success for his career and by extension his family. But when pitted vis-à-vis the dark Numinous as represented by Bughuul, these traits become reflections of evil and malfeasance, examples of just how isolated mankind is in their basest state from the shining perfection of God.²⁷ Oswald sees in Bughuul the darkest expressions of himself, the worst possible echo of his habits and actions, and by extension sees in himself as big a danger to his children as the monster that stalks them.²⁸ This is possible thanks to a worldview where mankind is no longer central, favored, or in connection with divinity as a process of the universe, but is instead apart, alone, and potentially insane. “In every case, the hauntings can be reduced to one formula: the part that turns against the whole... a member of the whole may be infected by Satan, Evil, the dark Numen, and join the Other side independently of the rest of the body, and [the] further assumption that, once thus infected, the

²⁶ Aguirre, *The Closed Space*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

The Crucible of Goodness

offending member can and must be isolated, cut off, plucked out that the body may live.”²⁹ We see and are haunted by our darkest selves because we reached too far into the Other world we are no longer meant to access and cannot possibly fathom. It is almost as if the identities the Dark Numen takes are acting as an immune system against our intrusion into a world outside of that which the Christian God has supposedly created for us.

Event Horizon and The Forbidden Fruit

In the last century, several events have occurred that have transformed the horror landscape: increased globalization; the invention of the atom bomb, leaving humanity with the realistic prospect of total annihilation; two World Wars; and not least of all, our technological advancements and first forays into space. Cosmic horror has taken a foothold through authors like H.P. Lovecraft, whose Cthulhu Mythos speaks to the terror of a truly pitiless universe where we are so unimportant as to be below microscopic, and Orson Wells, whose *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast introduced thousands to the fear of an invasion from beyond the stars. Technology has also taken a starring role in numerous horror tales as authors explore the implications of our scientific advancements and what they could unleash if conducted without moral concern, a tradition begun by that most famous of mad scientists, Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein.

One film blends these two concepts quite beautifully, merging fears of technology with fear of the unknown cosmos like two DNA strands of complimentary terror: 1997’s *Event Horizon*. Set in the year 2047, mankind has made astonishing advancements in this timeline in the realm of space travel, having already established a giant space station in Earth orbit and a colony on Mars. Failures have also occurred, the biggest one being that of the *Event Horizon*, an interstellar craft that disappeared without a trace on its maiden voyage to Proxima Centauri seven years before. Without warning, the *Event Horizon*’s distress signal has suddenly appeared near the orbit of Neptune, prompting a search-and-rescue team headed by Captain Miller (Laurence Fishburne) to be dispatched. Joining his crew for this mission is Dr. William Weir (Sam Neill), the scientist and designer of the *Event Horizon*. Weir tells the rescue crew this interstellar ship was built with an experimental “gravity drive,” which creates an artificial black hole, allowing the ship to jump through space-time and reach distant stars at faster-than-light speed.

²⁹ Ibid., 142.

The crew arrives, finding the *Event Horizon* in a decaying orbit with no power, heat, or gravity; a search of the ship shows evidence of some terrible massacre on the bridge, and a single frozen body, but no evidence as to just what has transpired over the missing seven years. Strange things begin to occur almost immediately: the gravity drive activates on its own and sucks Engineer Ensign Justin into its black hole, releasing a damaging wave shockwave that nearly destroys the search-and-rescue ship and leaves them stranded and running out of air. Justin re-emerges in a catatonic state, but is unable to cope with whatever he's seen on the other side of the black hole. He attempts suicide by throwing himself out of an airlock, muttering about "the dark inside me...from the other place...I won't go back there..." Several crew members begin to have vivid, violent hallucinations of their own internal fears and shames. They uncover a scrambled video log of the *Event Horizon's* original crew going insane and slaughtering each other. The crew deduces that the experimental gravity drive opened a gateway it did not intend, to somewhere "outside of our universe", a dimension unknown, which has somehow possessed the ship and is trying to drag them back. As Dr. Weir's sanity comes undone and crew members begin to die, Captain Miller tries desperately to save what is left of his team. This climaxes in a showdown between Miller and the fully possessed, horrifically mutilated Dr. Weir, who sets the gravity drive in motion to take them all to this dimension of "pure chaos, pure evil." Miller saves his living crew members in a decidedly messiah-like manner by detonating charges and splitting the *Event Horizon's* bridge from the gravity drive, sacrificing himself in the process, and his crew watches as a black hole opens and drags his half of the ship, along with Miller and Weir, into the dark depths before it closes.

The movie is disturbing on many levels. Space travel creates an isolation heretofore unknown to mankind, drifting in a foreign and ultimately inhospitable world, with literally no hope of rescue, a million cogs turning and sustaining a survival that will cease if any one of them fails—it is an astute reflection of mankind's current unconscious mindset, alone in a hostile universe and separated from our once-comforting Numinous. *Event Horizon* adds to this fear by showcasing how incredibly our advancing technology can fail us, that it can literally drag us into Hell. Dr. Weir's brilliance is turned into a disgusting hubris. His attempts to send us to stars that would have taken us thousands of years to reach otherwise is seen as a more than a folly, but a disaster on an epic scale. Pilot Smith, fittingly the only representative of a traditional Christian on the crew, attacks Weir thusly: "When you break all the laws of physics, did you seriously think there wouldn't be a price?" This is the crux of the issue at

The Crucible of Goodness

hand, the stalemate which Christianity and science have reached. For there's no question that science has transformed and enhanced humanity's livelihood, despite Christianity's attempts to stop it—unlike other religions such as Islam, most sects of Christianity have had no golden age which has fully supported the development of intellectual discourse. More often in many Christian denominations, there is an attitude of “what if this goes wrong?”, a fearful finger-wagging at the lack of moral consideration they believe science displays in its meddling with realms that are meant only for God, or in some extreme cases, an outright denial of scientific facts and hypotheses in general as reality (therefore negating any need to respond to it at all). Christianity is Pilot Smith, cursing and damning science for its hubris and need to understand, yet offering no alternative to slake the curiosity, no cooperative congregation to suit both parties.

Event Horizon also demonstrates examples of previously mentioned issues, such as the creation of an evil place that exists far removed from the realm of God and Earth-- only this time God's realm is extended far out into the galaxy, and Hell is resigned to literally “another dimension”, a place we had to “rip a hole in the universe” to find. Its graphic and gory depictions elevate the Hell dimension to a new level of fear. There is no talk of sins or salvation in a Christian sense, only chaos and insanity and endless, unspeakable suffering. This is the place our technological advancement and our need to travel outside the realm created for us by God has brought us to, a place that reads and feeds on our fears like an enormous demonic vampire.

This film also demonstrates a common trope within the genre related to this anti-scientific, anti-intellectual viewpoint perpetrated by Christianity, that of the “forbidden knowledge.” This is a trope that takes us all the way back to Genesis and the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. God forbids Adam and Eve to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and banishes them and all of their future generations when they disobey.³⁰ This sentiment has been echoed time and again in horror films, where an unwitting protagonist meddles with forces beyond his control that someone or something will warn him to stay away from, and yet he can't resist the pull of curiosity. *Event Horizon* demonstrates this with the gravity drive; in *Sinister*, the Super 8 films represent the forbidden knowledge; in *Evil Dead*, it is the *Necronomicon*, an ancient book bound in human skin full of demonic incantations and pagan rites that awakens an evil force in the

³⁰ Gen. 3 KJV.

forest; in *The Exorcist*, possession victim Regan MacNeil begins her horrifying ordeal by playing with a Ouija Board, which invites her seemingly harmless imaginary friend Captain Howdy into her house; the Clive Barker classic *Hellraiser* is set in motion thanks to the now-infamous puzzle box that opens a doorway to Hell when solved; *The Ring*, both in its Japanese original and American remake forms, set the tormented spirit Samara upon victims who dared to watch her disturbing video tape. Perhaps the most well-known example is outside the horror genre, the “One Ring” from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, so powerful it cannot even exist without threatening the whole of Middle-Earth. This is but a tiny sliver of examples of this idea that there are powers or borders beyond mankind’s reckoning, borders that when crossed end in devastation for the protagonist and her surrounding cohorts. “The horror genre is an embodiment of the Closed Space symbol and begins and will predictably end with a confrontation of this space by man. It has to do with boundaries, limits, barriers and their transgression; with the Dark as manifested in man’s confrontation with and persecution by Evil, the Alien, the Other. It is fundamentally a Christian literature even when (and precisely when) it reverses or destroys Christian values; and it deals essentially with Mystery, the awful, awesome, numinous presence in its dark aspect: with a world of order touched by the non-natural—whether this be ‘unnatural’, ‘supernatural’, or as Bleiler (1983) has it, ‘contranatural’.”³¹ The Christian worldview has built this Closed Space around mankind by cutting our contact with the Numinous, allowing the only time we touch it to be when we cross that final doorway into death. No other breach can be allowed, for in this worldview, outside is only darkness.

³¹ Aguirre, *The Closed Space*, 84.

Conclusion

Myth “is a story, like most, of facts familiar to oneself but which, until something happens to make returning to them impossible in the familiar way, one gives almost no thought. Furthermore, it is in a foreign world beyond them that one discovers the possibility of an entirely gratuitous and perplexing challenge to one’s assumptions about their reality...the unfolding myth has discovered oneself in one’s innocent panic and disbelief. A myth, as William Alfred has written in the foreword to his modern version of *Agamemnon*, is an ‘ambush of reality.’ It hides within the undergrowth of one’s ordinary facts, like the voice of Merlin in the whitethorn bush, and seizes an unsuspected reality in oneself.”³²

Nothing quite ambushes our reality of perceived safety and comfort like the horror genre, and by ambushing the genre itself through analysis, we discover what it is telling us about itself, and ourselves: that even in this unprecedented age of scientific advancement and a highly globalized world, we are still quite afraid of the Christian God, his demons, and the possibility that our very human nature will damn us to the evil of non-existence. We are afraid to look at what we are and see the possibility that perhaps we are not worth saving. When questioned by Father Karras about why Regan has come under demonic attack in *The Exorcist*, Father Merrin answers thusly, an eloquent allegory to modern horror’s relationship to mankind: “Yet I think the demon’s target is not the possessed; it is us... the observers... every person in this house. And I think—I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien: to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly; unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. For I think belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it is finally a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love *us*...”³³

³² Alan M. Olson, *Myth, Symbol and Reality* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press) 16.

³³ William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (New York: HarperCollins), 351-352.

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