

The Satanic Panic of the Warrens

The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It
and the Satanic Cult Horror Film

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Previous studies	6
The Satanic cult horror film	8
Mapping the Satanic cult horror film	9
Table 1: Satanic cult themed horror films 1916–2021	10
Table 2: Satanism themed horror films 1916–2021	11
Early devilry	12
Rosemary’s babies	12
Satanic Panic: Satan comes to your home	14
The Satanic Y2K bug	15
The Return of Darkness and Evil	15
<i>The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It</i>	17
Satanic cult horror and genre theory	18
Genre life cycles	18
Genre development of the Satanic cult horror film	21
The 2017–2021 films	22
The Warrens as protagonists	25
The structure of sympathy	26
Creating allegiance with the Warrens	29
Concluding remarks	31
Summary	32
References	34

Abstract

This thesis examines the Satanic cult in horror film – historically and in contemporary horror films. A quantitative analysis of horror films with themes of Satanism and Satanic cults is presented, in which three particular upswings in the themes are seen – one in the 1970s, one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as one from the mid 2010s and onwards.

In the thesis' second part, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (Michael Chaves, 2021) is examined. The film differs affectively from other Satanic cult horror films of its time, and this thesis tries to find out why. The film is examined with the help of genre theories of genre life cycles, but most importantly, it focuses on the film's interchange of the common character types of the "doubter" and the "expert". This interchange, the author argues, has huge implications for the film, making it affectively validate the notion of an underground Satanic threat – societal as well as spiritual – thus somewhat aligning it with the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: Horror film, Satanism, Satanic Panic, *The Conjuring*

Introduction

Hooded figures in a dungeon, standing around an altar on which a naked woman is laid. A high priest/priestess leads the hooded congregation in a black mass in praise of The Dark Lord. As the chanting intensifies, a dagger is produced, and if we have not realized it before, that woman on the altar is about to be sacrificed to the Devil.

The scene described is from no particular film, but have nonetheless been seen in countless horror movies. It is a trope of the Satanic cult horror film, where Satanists – often from the upper strata of society – serve as antagonists. For some, this scene appears ludicrous. For others, it might be frightening. Still others might find it exciting, or even titillating. The response to Satanic cults in horror films might not only fluctuate between audiences of varying tastes or cultural context, but also through time. What was once perceived as horrifying might today be kitsch, or even ridiculous. Sometimes it might be all of them at once.

The Satanic cult is a theme with a long history in horror film, but the research on the subject is scarce. The purpose of this thesis is to make a contribution to the study of this subgenre by taking a closer look at the Satanic cult horror film in general, and one of this subgenre's latest iterations in particular. My aim is to contribute to the discussions of the horror film, recognizing the traces back into the horror genre's history, but still focusing on the here and now, on the contemporary horror film genre. The topic, however, is not merely of relevance to the subject of film studies. The fluctuations in the flow of Satanic cult horror does not take place in a vacuum. The cultural contexts in which these films are made and consumed offer differing possibilities for horror films on Satanic cults to resonate. Politics, social issues and the status of religion in society are just a few of the factors affecting the conditions for these films to resonate, and for creating the cultural contexts in which they are made – and watched.

After an historical overview of the Satanic cult horror, I will focus on films made in the last five years, and, finally, narrow the scope even more, to only one film in this subgenre: *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (Michael Chaves, 2021).

The choice to deal mainly with *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (henceforth called *The Conjuring 3*), the third chapter in the *Conjuring* film series (the eighth film in the franchise of the "Conjuring universe"). is that it is by far the most commercially successful of the films from this period, grossing more than 200 million dollars worldwide.¹

¹ According to The Internet Movie Database, IMDB (imdb.com, retrieved 2022-04-12)

While decidedly more critically acclaimed, the second most successful film, *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), "only" made 80 millions.²

But, most importantly, the film is of particular interest because it, in my opinion, affectively differs from the other films of the same period. Something about this film feels a bit "off" compared to the other contemporaneous Satanic cult horror films. It is as if this film gives the issue of a Satanic cult threat more gravity than the other films do. Something about it that makes *The Conjuring 3* feel like it could have been made in the 1980s, and deliberately or unintentionally function as a propaganda piece for the Satanic Panic.³ But why? And how?

In this thesis I will try to answer the following two questions:

- How has the Satanic cult horror film as a subgenre developed over time? How have different cultural moments altered the conditions for these films to resonate in their cultural contexts?

- Why does *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* differ affectively from other Satanic cult horror films of its time? What about its intrinsic structure and its relation to other films in the subgenre create the notion of Satanism as a societal and/or spiritual threat?

To answer the first question, I will do a quantitative analysis of horror films with a Satanic cult theme. This will be accomplished through advanced searches on IMDB, resulting in year-by-year charts showing how the amount of horror films on the subject have fluctuated. My hypothesis is that there is an upswing in this kind of films right now, and that it has been preceded by earlier upswings. After accounting for what film scholars have written about possible reasons for earlier waves of this kind of films, I will suggest a couple of contemporary phenomena that the current upswing might be due to.

To answer the second question I will narrow the scope and focus on the latest wave of Satanic cult horror in general, and one of its iterations, *The Conjuring 3*, in particular. Here I will make use of the theories of a genre's evolution, genre cycles and clusters, or a genre's "life cycle", as presented and discussed by Rick Altman, John G Cawelti, Steve Neale, Thomas Schatz, Leger Grindon and Tag Gallagher. Can the answer to my question about what makes *The Conjuring 3* differ from other contemporary Satanic cult horror films be found among these theories about genre development, from a period of articulation, through a stage of conscious self-awareness, until the patterns are so well-known that audiences are bored with them?⁴ I will use these theories in an eclectic mode to examine if the affective difference

² IMDB (retrieved 2022-04-12)

³ For a brief overview of the Satanic Panic and its notions of a Satanic threat, see page 13

⁴ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, London; BFI Publishing, 1999, p 21

in *The Conjuring 3* has to do with the film breaking a pattern that its contemporaneous Satanic cult horror films follow. My hypothesis is that there is an increasing self-consciousness apparent in these films, but that this is lacking in the *Conjuring* film.

The issue of genre development is hotly debated among genre theorists, and there is no consensus on how – or even *if* – genre development can be mapped in this way. However, when applying these theories, I will employ what is useful for this particular examination, without any claims about this method being generally applicable in every other case study of a genre's development.

As it turns out, these theories do not go all the way. Even though my examination somewhat validates the theories of long-lived genres eventually adapting a self-conscious mode, there are other films examined than the *Conjuring* film that do not adapt a self-conscious mode. I have not yet identified what makes the *Conjuring* differ affectively.

As the genre theories do not suffice, I also turn to examining *The Conjuring 3* through its use of protagonists. I will argue that the cause of the affective difference between this film and the others of this period is to be found in the *Conjuring* film's interplay between an exchange of character types in the roles of protagonists, and the ways in which the film encourages the audience to make propitious moral evaluations of the protagonists. More simply, I will argue that the answer to the affective differences between the films is to be found in the choice of protagonists in *The Conjuring 3*. Carrol L Fry identifies the characters of the "doubter"/"scoffer" and the "expert" as two common devices in the occult horror film. I argue that it is the uncommon positioning of these character types in the film's plot that is the main cause for *The Conjuring 3* affective difference from the other films of this period, and that this is done in interaction with what Murray Smith calls a *structure of sympathy*, a system of identification consisting of three levels – *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. This, I argue, is what makes *The Conjuring 3* somewhat validate the fearful notions of a real Satanist threat against the societal order and the public's safety – a notion reconnecting with the "Satanic panic" of the 1980s and 1990s.

Previous studies

As mentioned, the writings on Satanic cults in horror film are scarce, but literature on bordering subjects is slightly more common. For the study on Satanic cults in horror films the film studies literature most relevant are on occultism and the Satan figure. In the more overarching literature on the horror film, the subject is all but absent.

Emily D. Edwards' *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (2005) examines the representation of the occult in media, and contains a useful chapter on witches where the author distinguishes the Satanic witch as one of eight common categories of witches portrayed in film and television.⁵ The witches' coven is often rendered Satanic in horror films, and is in many cases synonymous with the Satanic cult.

Carrol L. Fry writes about the "Satanic film" in his 2008 book *Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film*. While containing some factual errors and sensationalist conclusions in its description of the history of Satanism, the chapter on Satanic film convincingly connects Satanic cults in horror film to paranoia and fear of the Other.⁶ Fry also identifies "the Satanic coven or cult story" as one of four central plot lines in the Satanic film, the others being the coming of the Antichrist, the exorcism theme, and the Faust story.⁷ Most relevant for this examination are, however, his points about the characters of the "scoffer"/"doubter" and the "expert" – a short passage in Fry's book, but – as it turns out – of enormous importance to my examination of *The Conjuring 3*.

The most recent book on the subject is an anthology edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen, *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema* (2021). As the title suggests, this collection of essays addresses the appearances of the Satan figure on film, but – except for brief mentions in the chapters on *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen* and *The Witch* – the subject of Satanism is left undealt with.⁸

Interestingly, the book most engaged with the depiction of Satanism on film is not written by a film scholar, or a scholar at all, but Satanist musician, author and filmmaker Nikolas Schreck. In *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to the Devil in Cinema* (2000), Schreck chronologically tells the story of not only Satan's, but also his disciples', appearances on film. While undeniably knowledgeable on the subject, Schreck is too governed by his own taste in film for the book to be of more than marginal academic use. For example, the chapters on 1980s and 1990s film are less exhaustive than the others, due to Schreck finding these

⁵ Emily D. Edwards, *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture*, Carbondale, Illinois; Illinois University Press, 2005, p 73–138

⁶ Carrol L. Fry, *Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film*, Bethlehem; Lehigh University Press, 2008, p 92–157

⁷ Carrol L. Fry, *Cinema of the Occult*, p 93

⁸ On *Rosemary's Baby*: David Sterritt, "His Father's Eyes: *Rosemary's Baby*", p 71–85; On *The Omen*: R Barton Palmer, "From the Eternal Sea He Rises, Creating Armies on Either Shore: The Antichristology of the *Omen* Franchise", p 86–102; On *The Witch*: Simon Bacon, "Agency or Allowance: The Satanic Complications of Female Autonomy in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Witch*", p 149–160. All in Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew & Hansen, Regina M: *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema*, New York; Fordham University Press, 2021

decades to be an "aesthetically void era".⁹ Lacking footnotes and references, and containing a few factual errors, it is still a valuable overview of the history of Satan and Satanism on film.

The Satanic Cult horror film

So, what is a "Satanic cult horror film"? Since even a very brief discussion on genre theory and what constitutes genres would be far too extensive here, it could at least be appropriate to mention what I mean by genre. Rick Altman identifies genre as a complex context with four main meanings: genre as blueprint, genre as structure, genre as label, and genre as contract.¹⁰ Here, I work with the concept of genre as label, simply the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors".¹¹ Since I use the IMDB to collect data for a quantitative analysis, if a film is labeled as horror on said website, I consider it a horror film for this examination. The "Satanic cult" prefix is a thematic one, used here to define a subgenre based on a theme in the films' plots.

So, a Satanic cult horror film is a horror film where the threat that the protagonists face are persons – or a person – involved in a Satanic/Devil worshipping cult. It is, of course, closely related to, and largely overlapping, the occult and/or Satanic horror film where occult and/or Satanic themes play an important part. For example, both *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) are occult horror films, but only the former features a Satanic cult.

The subgenre can also be found on both sides of the border between *realistic* and *supernatural* horror films, the two main sub-types of the horror genre as suggested by Aaron Smuts.¹²

Occult and/or Devilish themes in movies are almost as old as the movies themselves. Even before the 20th century, George Méliès made a number of short films portraying the Devil, including *Le manoir du diable* (The House of the Devil, 1896). However, it must be noted that not all of these films might have been made to horrify but to amuse its audience.

While Satanism themed films like Val Lewton produced *The Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson, 1943) and UK/US produced *Night of the Demon* (aka *Curse of the Demon*, Jacques Tourneur, 1957) are sometimes acknowledged by film scholars, the common narrative is that

⁹ Nikolas Schreck, *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to the Devil in Cinema*, London; Creation Books, 2000, p 10

¹⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, p 14

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Aaron Smuts, "Cognitive and Philosophical Approaches to Horror", in Benshoff, Harry M (ed), *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Wiley Blackwell, 2017, p 6

themes of Satan and Satanism in horror films began *for real* with *Rosemary's Baby* and/or *The Exorcist*.¹³ Even though this holds some truth, it does not give the whole picture. As I will show in the following sections, not only were there occasional horror films on the Satanic cult subject as early as in the 1910s, but the waves of Satanic horror post *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* were preceded by ripples already in the earlier 1960's.

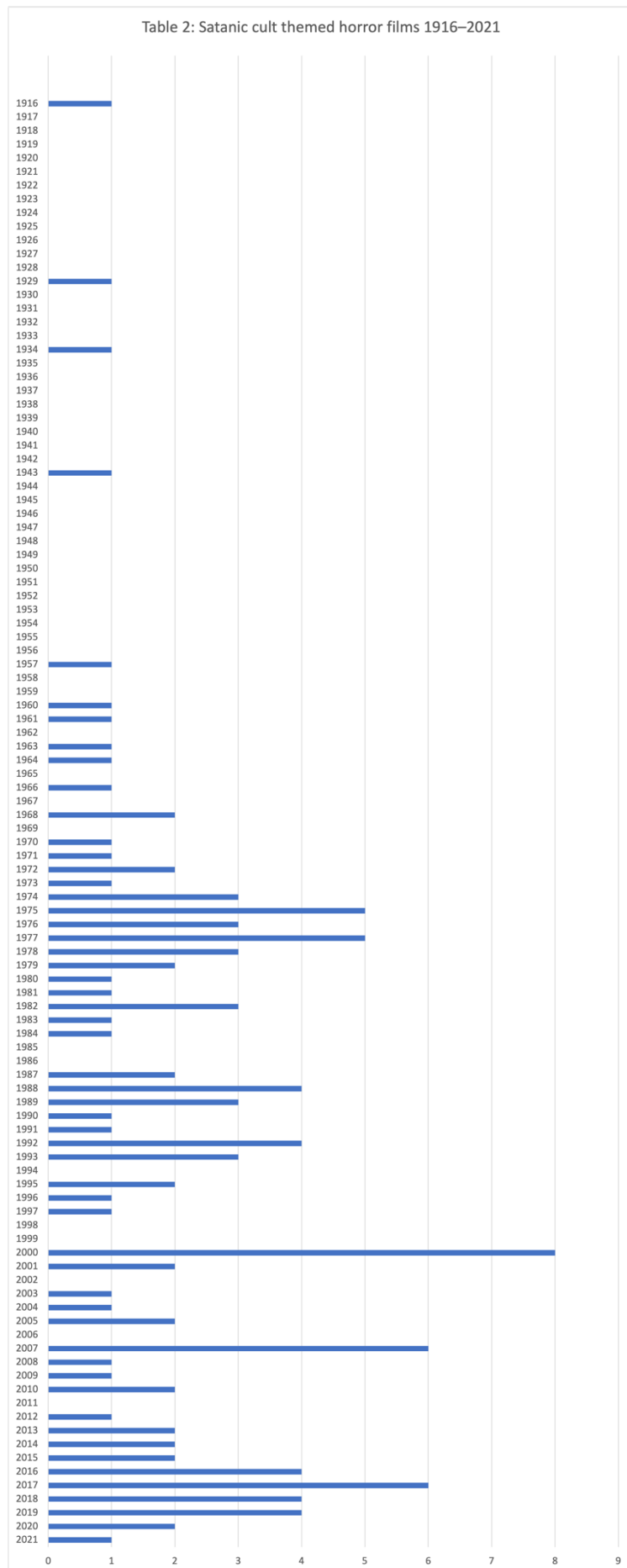
Mapping the Satanic Cult horror film

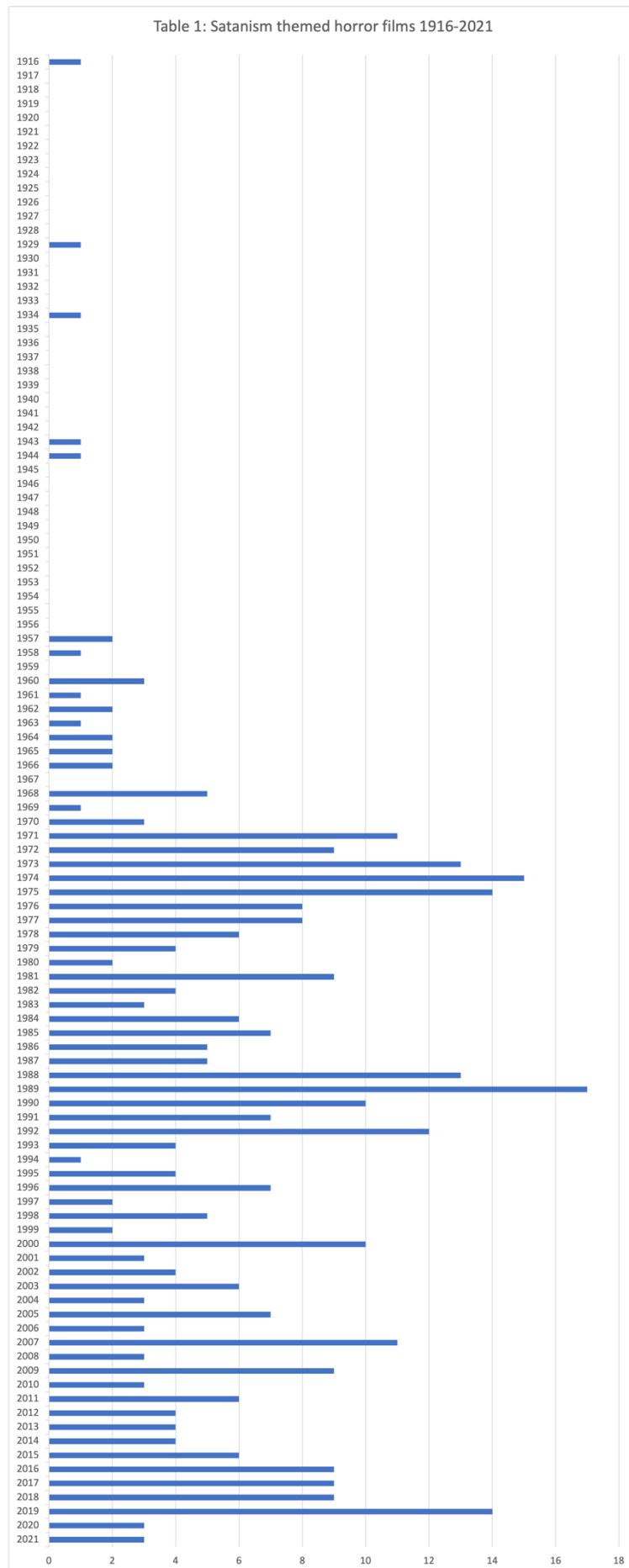
This quantitative analysis of the Satanic cult horror film have been executed by entering appropriate keywords in the "advanced search" function on The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) website. This is not the sharpest tool. Firstly, the number (and quality) of keywords entered differs largely between films. For example, even though the keywords "satanic cult" are those best suited in narrowing down my search, the Bela Lugosi/Boris Karloff film *The Black Cat* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1934) lacks that particular key phrase, even though it features a Satanic cult. Secondly, the genre labels on IMDB are not always the ones I would use. For example, the undeniably Satanic film *The Ninth Gate* (Roman Polanski, 1999) is not labeled as horror (possibly to not spoil the ending), excluding even this film from my search results. However, this is still the most useful method for an easy overview of the subgenre's history, and therefore I persevere in using it. It is, however, not reliable as a source for exact number of films on the subject.

Searching for horror films (feature films, video titles and TV movies) with the keywords "Satanic cult" results in a total of 117 films (see table 1). A broader search, also including the keywords "Satanism", "Satanist", "devil worship", "devil worshipers", "devil worshiper", "Satan worship" and "Satanic ritual" results in 243 films (see table 2).

As shown in both charts, the films relevant to this examination are scarce pre the 1960s. Since then, there has not been a single year without at least one Satanism themed horror film. The more specifically Satanic cult themed horror films are fewer, but the patterns in the charts are similar in their ebb and flow-like appearance. A first increase of these films is seen around the 1970s, a second in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then a third from the mid 2010s onwards. This later wave is more obvious in table 1, but when comparing the two charts the patterns are similar.

¹³ For *Rosemary's Baby*: Robin Wood, *On the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, Detroit; Wayne State University Press, 2018, p 57. For *The Exorcist*: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York & London; Routledge, 1990, p 3





Early devilry

While themes related to the Satanic are prevalent in early horror cinema – for example the Faustian bargain theme of *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*, Stellan Rye, 1913) and *Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage* (*Faust*, FW Murnau, 1926) – explicit Satanism in horror films seems to have its beginnings in the partly lost US serial *The Mysteries of Myra* (Leopold Wharton & Theodore Wharton, 1916), where a secret organization called the Black Order uses magical curses to achieve its goals.

Before the 1960s, there are only eight Satanism themed horror films listed, while in the first seven years of the 1960s, no less than 13 were made. Five out of these have the key phrase "Satanic cult" attached to them.

Rosemary's babies

Roman Polanski's 1968 Ira Levin film adaptation *Rosemary's Baby* and William Friedkin's 1973 adaptation of the William Peter Blatty novel *The Exorcist* (1971) are often given credit for initiating the boom of occult and Satanic horror films in the 1970s. Noël Carroll even dismisses the 1970s occult horror films post *The Exorcist* as "a slew of copycats".¹⁴ While there is *some* truth to both these notions, they do not show the whole picture. The Satanic horror films and Satanic cult horror films of the 1970s are a diverse bunch of films; besides the theme of Satanic cults there is not much likeness between the folk horror period piece *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), the corporate vampire conspiracy of *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (Alan Gibson, 1975) and the car chase thriller *Race with the Devil* (Jack Starrett, 1975).

Neither were *Rosemary's Baby* the only 1968 horror film to tackle the subject of secret Satanism. Only two days after the premiere of Polanski's film, on March 14, the sex, drugs and satanic rites-filled *The Satanist* (Zoltan G Spencer, 1968) had its first screening in Los Angeles, and by summer, British Hammer Films' Dennis Wheatley adaptation *The Devil Rides Out* (Terence Fisher, 1968) came to both UK and US cinemas.

Why was it then that the late 1960s and the 1970s saw a relative abundance in Satanic cult horror films? Here, a statement must be made about the dialectics between culture and society. Along with Kendall R Phillips I argue that "[r]ather than creating cultural fears or reflecting them [...] the kinds of films with which we are here concerned can be said to attain

¹⁴ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York & London; Routledge, 1990, p 3

influence by resonating with the broader culture”.¹⁵ But what in the 1960s and 1970s of the US and the rest of the West was it that the occult and Satanic horror films resonated with? Charles Derry summarizes some relevant factors of this period: The death of the popular pope John XXIII in 1964, and his successor Paul VI’s visit to the US in 1965 (the first pope to make such a visit) increased the awareness and interest in Catholicism, but at the same time “the percentage of Americans who faithfully went to church reached an all-time low, and Time magazine (on April 8, 1966) asked provocatively in a cover story ‘Is God Dead?’.”¹⁶

Further, the founding of the Church of Satan in 1966, and the publishing of their *Satanic Bible* in 1969 gained much attention. There was also an increase in the interest on topics like fortune-telling, seances, Wicca, reincarnation and astrology.¹⁷ The brutal murders committed by the followers of Charles Manson brought the darker sides of the 1960s counterculture into light, and the fact that one of the victims was the pregnant wife of the director of *Rosemary’s Baby* gave that film an aura of cursedness.

Before the start of the 1970s, when the Watergate scandal and the lost US war in Vietnam would further the overall feel of decline and paranoia in the US, the dreams of the countercultures and the flower power children seemed crushed. Phillips describes this in his analysis of *Night of the Living Dead* (George A Romero, 1968):

the dreams of a youth revolution – motivated by opposition to the war in Vietnam and embracing tolerance, free love, and common property – had already been coming apart. The assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., perhaps the most authoritative voice for change during the turbulent decade of the sixties, on April 14, 1968, was followed just a few months later by the assassination of the heir to the decade's optimistic beginning. The death of Senator Robert Kennedy, the brother and close ally of slain President John Kennedy, seemed to sum up the rapid and violent dissolution of the decade's movements toward peaceful cultural revolution. At Altamont, the brutal violence of this unraveling was visited upon the last refuge of the sixties' Utopian dream, music.¹⁸

As table 1 and 2 show, the 1970s came with an upswing in Satanic horror and Satanic cult horror films. While the titles are too many to mention here, a curious thing is that besides appearing in horror films of different budgets and artistic merit, Satanic cults also appeared on television, in episodes of mainstream US shows *Starsky and Hutch* (1978 episode “Satan’s

¹⁵ Kendall R Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Westport, Connecticut; Praeger Publishers, 2005, p 6

¹⁶ Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950's to the 21st Century*, Jefferson, NC; McFarland & Co, Inc Publishers, 2009, p 90

¹⁷ Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0*, pp 103-104

¹⁸ Kendall R Phillips, *Projected Fears*, pp 81-82

Witches”) and *The Fantastic Journey* (episode 6, 1977; *An Act of Love*). These, however, are not included in the statistics of table 1 and 2.

Satanic Panic: Satan comes to your home

While the increase in Satanic cult horror in the late 1980s and early 1990s is visible in table 1, the increase in horror films with broader Satanic themes is more obvious in table 2. The two are, of course, closely connected.

To understand this particular upswing for the Satanic cult horror film, it should be seen in the light of the cultural moment called the Satanic Panic in the 1980s and 1990s, where the notion of widespread Satanic cults committing sexual abuse, infant sacrifice and mind control was pushed by both religious and secular organizations, media, psychotherapists and child-welfare advocates, mostly in the US and the UK. The cults were believed to be well-organized, infiltrating even police forces and governments.¹⁹ The ”evidence” largely consisted of alleged or ”recovered” memories, extracted from small children by both parents and professionals.²⁰

Sometimes the claims included actual supernatural phenomena summoned by the Satanists. Other claims were more ”realistic”. But the borders between the two ways of understanding the threat of Satanism – as social threat only, or even as a supernatural/spiritual threat – were not entirely rigid.

During the 1980s, the Satanic Panic seems to have had an interesting relationship to horror film. In his 2015 article ”Horror Movies at Home: Supernatural Horror, Delivery Systems and 1980’s Satanic Panic”, Drew Beard examines the relationship between the Satanic Panic and the reemergence of the 1970s supernatural horror films through the then new delivery systems of home video and cable tv. With ample references to sceptic and science writer Michael Shermer, Beard paints a vivid picture of how films like *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982) had their life cycles extended by the emergence of cable tv and home video, becoming loaded with meaning when watched in a period of ”increasingly reactionary discourse concerned with, among other things, a sharp increase in the divorce rate after the late 1950’s, a rise in dual income families with both parents working outside the home, [...] an increased awareness of child abuse [...] and the swelling ranks of children in daycare along with ’latchkey kids’ who came home to empty

¹⁹ David Frankfurter, ”The Satanic Ritual Abuse as Religious-Studies Data”, In *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, Vol 50, Brill Publishers, 2003, p 108.

²⁰ David Frankfurter, ”The Satanic Ritual Abuse as Religious-Studies Data”, p 109

houses and apartments after school”.²¹ Together with newer films, these supernatural horror films constituted the *additional external information* which, combined with internal conditions (“a prevalent feeling of loss of personal control and responsibility, and the need to place blame for misfortune elsewhere”²²) and external conditions (“socio-economic stresses, cultural and political crises, religious strife, and moral upheavals”²³) created a *feedback loop* necessary for an event like the Satanic Panic.²⁴ Gossip and media contributed with an increasing amount of alarmist reports and information, while horror films were used as illustrating examples. For example, a turning point in the Satanic Panic of the US were the 1985 airing of the ABC primetime show *The Devil Worshipers*, where scenes from *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist* were used as examples of rituals practiced.²⁵

Like the differing claims in the Satanic Panic, the Satanic cult horror films of the 1980s can not be placed on one side of the border between the “realistic” and the supernatural. But without closer reading of all the films of this era, it is hard to draw any conclusions about differences or similarities with earlier or later waves of Satanic cult horror films. Many of the films seem to have been mostly forgotten – or never even noticed – even by horror fans, with the exceptions of *The Believers* (John Schlesinger, 1987) and *Prince of Darkness* (John Carpenter, 1987).

The Satanic Y2K bug

The sudden and short-lived peak in Satanic cult horror in the year of 2000 is a curious one. Possible explanations could be that the emergence of a new millennium teased the imagination, but as the two supernatural horror films Hollywood produced in 1999 – *End of Days* (Peter Hyams) and *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright) – didn’t perform as expected (neither financially nor critically), the wave quickly waned.

The Return of Darkness and Evil

As table 1 and 2 both indicate (a bit clearer in table 1), there seems to be another upswing in the Satanic cult horror film from circa 2016 onwards. The films of 2016, however, are seemingly low budget films made for streaming and dvd/bluray, and shown cinematically

²¹ Drew Beard, “Horror Movies at Home: Supernatural Horror, Delivery Systems and 1980’s Satanic Panic”, In *Horror Studies*, Vol 6 No 2, Intellect Ltd, 2015, pp 212-213

²² Drew Beard, “Horror Movies at Home”, p 219

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Drew Beard, “Horror Movies at Home”, p 218

only in the festival circuit, if at all. Perhaps they can be viewed similarly to the Satanic cult horror films of the pre *Rosemary's Baby* 1960s – as ripples before the actual wave.

But why now? There are no analyses available as far as I know, and neither will I contribute with any elaborate analysis. But, with inspiration from the explanations contributed by scholars on the earlier waves of occult/Satanic horror, I will suggest two factors I believe to have some significance, pointing to changes in the religious and political landscapes of the US, and partly in the rest of the West. Minor changes, yet connected to major political conflicts.

First, there is the unexpected success of The Satanic Temple, an atheist group based in the US, and whose main focus lie on political actions and lobbying efforts for social and political issues as LGBTQ issues, the right to abortion, and battling the influence of religion on federal and local government. Founded sometime in 2012 or 2013, they received large publicity when launching an initiative to raise a seven-foot statue of Baphomet (the goat deity as designed by 19th century esotericist Éliphas Lévi) outside the Oklahoma State Capitol, as a response to the decision by the state to raise a monument to the ten commandments of the Bible at that location.²⁶

A documentary was made about The Satanic Temple, called *Hail Satan?* (Penny Lane, 2019), where the organization's origins and its political activism was highlighted. The film was nominated for – and won – a number of awards, and was well received by both critics and audience.²⁷

The other factor I suggest has some importance to this latest wave of Satanic cult horror films is at the opposite of the political spectrum from The Satanic Temple; the QAnon conspiracy theory. Researchers associated with non-profit, cross-disciplinary research organization ACTRI (American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute), describes QAnon as

no longer a traditional conspiracy theory that ties together a small pool of individuals based on misguided beliefs; it has sharply evolved into a radical cult-like movement that does not strictly operate in an online space. Not only has the U.S.-based conspiracy gained global traction, but QAnon followers have now mobilized offline committing real acts of violence. QAnon and its followers

²⁶ Manon Hedenborg White & Fredrik Gregorius, "The Satanic Temple: Secularist Activism and Occulture in the American Political Landscape", In *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, 10.1, 2019, p 97

²⁷ Based on 132 reviews, *Hail Satan?* has a 96 % approval rate on Rotten Tomatoes, and an 85 % audience score. www.rottentomatoes.com/m/hail:satan/ (retrieved May 17, 2022). On Metacritic the score is 76 out of 100, with 31 positive reviews and none negative or mixed. www.metacritic.com/movie/hail-satan/critic-reviews/ (retrieved May 17, 2022). That the film can be viewed on Swedish public service SVT's web service (as *Heja Satan?*) illustrates the success of something so seemingly marginal as a Satanic organization whose members are mostly based in the US.

have become one of the largest spreaders of disinformation online, worsening an already polarized American public.²⁸

The main pillar of the QAnon conspiracy theory (or rather conspiracies, since it combines different theories, and not every adherent of QAnon necessarily believes in all of them), is that "a cabal of deep state Satan-worshipping and paedophile politicians is taking over the government".²⁹ In 2016, rumors about Hillary Clinton being involved in a child sex-trafficking ring connected to a Washington DC pizza shop circulated online. This theory could be seen as a predecessor to the larger conspiracy theories of QAnon, where anti-Semitic inspired notions of blood libels have evolved into the belief that the members of this cabal extracts chemical adrenochrome from the blood of children to extend their own lifespan.³⁰

There are, of course, more factors to take into consideration when trying to figure out why there has been an upswing in the Satanic cult horror film in later years, and these are only suggestions of two of them. However, the fact that these are movements on opposite sides of the political spectrum indicate a certain heightened interest in the Satanic, either in form of an enemy to fear and to fight, or as a rebellious set of symbols and beliefs challenging societal norms. On both sides, however, Satan seems to represent liberal values.

The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It

The Conjuring 3 is the third chapter in the extremely successful *Conjuring* film series, beginning with the box office success of *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013). On a budget of \$20 millions, the international gross of over \$319 millions made it the second most financially successful horror film ever, topped only by *The Exorcist*. Three years later *The Conjuring 2* (James Wan, 2016) made number three on that same list.³¹ There are also a number of spinoff films taking place in the *Conjuring* "universe"; *Annabelle* (John R Leonetti, 2014), *Annabelle: Creation* (David F Sandberg, 2017), *The Nun* (Corin Hardy, 2018), *The Curse of La Llorona* (Michael Chaves, 2019) and *Annabelle Comes Home* (Gary Dauberman, 2019), with *The Conjuring 3* being the eighth and latest film in the expanded franchise.

²⁸ Amanda Garry et al, "QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization", In *Journal for Deradicalization*, Spring 2021, Nr 26, pp 152-153

²⁹ Amanda Garry et al, 2021, p 156

³⁰ Amanda Garry et al, 2021, pp 156-157

³¹ Anthony D'Allesandro, "'The Conjuring 2' Crosses \$300M & Becomes Third-Highest-Grossing Horror Franchise", *Deadline* July 20, 2016. deadline.com/2016/07/the-conjuring-2-third-highest-grossing-horror-franchise-box-office-1201789474/ (retrieved May 4, 2022)

The plot follows paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga) in their investigation of what seems to be a demonic possession of a young man named Arne Johnson (Ruairi O'Connor), but in fact proves to be a curse put upon him by a Satanist (Eugenie Bondurant).

My claim that *The Conjuring 3* somewhat validates the notion of a societal threat of underground Satanist activity is not to be read primarily as an ideological reading of the plot as text, but is based on the emotional response that the film evokes. I believe that the reasons for this affective response that the film offers the spectator are to be found in the film's structure, and that these elements can be identified through studying the film – in itself and in relation to other films of its subgenre and time period.

I do not claim that this is the only way to read the film. Neither do I claim that the film could not be read in other ways *simultaneously*. There is, after all, different modes of watching horror films. Aside from wanting to be frightened in a safe way, these films are also watched for the pleasure of reveling in grotesque and horrific scenes and scenarios. Why else would they be watched by those spectators who have long stopped being frightened?

Satanic cult horror and genre theory

Is the "off" feel of *The Conjuring 3* related to how it "behaves" as a horror film? In trying to explore this possibility I will use the different approaches to genre development – that is, the internal development of a genre – to find out if there are differences in how the film relates to eventual patterns seen in the other Satanic cult horror films of its time. Are there different approaches to the Satanic cult themes or to the horror elements of the story in *The Conjuring 3* that cannot be found in the other films of comparison?

Genre life cycles

Rick Altman has divided the views on genre development into two "closely related paradigms, both dependent on organic metaphors".³² The first one he describes as treating the genre as "a living being, with individual films reflecting specific age brackets".³³ He exemplifies with a quote from Jane Feuer where she points out that "film genres, especially long-lived ones such as the Western and the musical, follow a predictable life cycle".³⁴

³² Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, p 21

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid. Altman has taken the quote from Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (2nd edition, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

Altman concludes that "[t]he notion that a genre grows according to a human development scheme accompanies a more general anthropomorphism whereby genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious, and to self-destruct".³⁵

According to Altman, critics "who stress change over continuity typically also turn to a second model, that of biological evolution",³⁶ a model seemingly stressing predictable stages of evolution in genre development, exemplified by Thomas Schatz who, according to Altman, "shuttles between Christian Metz's classic-parody-contestation-critique model and Henri Focillon's quadripartite version of the life forms: the experimental age, the classic age, the age of refinement, the baroque age".³⁷

Steve Neale explains and critiques these two approaches in the following way:

The first is what [Hans Robert] Jauss has called "the evolutionary schema of growth, flowering, and decay." This schema is open to several objections: it is teleological; it is (for all its organic metaphors) highly mechanistic; and it treats genres in isolation from any generic regime. Similar objections apply to a second model of evolutionary development, used by Thomas Schatz, in which genres progress toward self-conscious formalism.³⁸

But Neale also adds a third approach, one he traces to the Russian formalists. This third approach can be summarized as a struggle between dominating and rivaling genres, or, within genres, as "an interplay between canonized and noncanonized forms of representation".³⁹ Within a genre, the historical alternation is manifested in the three stages of *canonization*, *automation* and *reshuffling*, and a genre loses momentum to other genres if it cannot – in the reshuffling stage – incorporate new elements, or elements previously subordinate to dominant elements of the genre.⁴⁰

While this third approach is far less deterministic than the other two, it should still not be totally incompatible with the others. Take, for example, John Cawelti's view that

[o]ne can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well known that people become tired of their

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre", in Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, p 191

³⁹ Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre", pp 192-193

⁴⁰ Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre", p 192

predictability. It is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate and new genres gradually arise.⁴¹

Is what Cawelti writes about in the quote above not an example of the reshuffling stage of the formalist approach?

It must be said that these evolutionary and life cycle-focused approaches suffer from their tendency to view genre development as a teleological process subordinate to some genre theory's law of nature. Its proponents have also been accused of picking and choosing their examples to fit their theories. Tag Gallagher aims mainly at Thomas Schatz in his "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western", where he dismisses Schatz' – and many others' writing on the evolution of the Western genre⁴² – claims about the genre's evolutionary road:

Every argument that evolution exists at all comes down not to evidence mustered through representative sampling but either to bald assertions or to invidious comparisons between a couple of titles – a "classic" western versus a "self-conscious" western – selected specifically to illustrate the assertion. A film is considered "classic" when it matches a critic's paradigm of the ideal western.⁴³

After exemplifying how even the Westerns of the 1910s often possessed that same self-reflexivity which Schatz and others ascribe to later Western films, Gallagher claims that the abundance of Western movies in the cinemas (probably more in one month of 1909 than in the entire decade of the 1930s, according to Gallagher) resulted in a "hyperconsciousness" of the genre among audience and critics.⁴⁴

Even if Gallagher is correct (I am fairly convinced he is), and the various claims of how genres develop are highly flawed, he himself seems to fail to see how "hyperconsciousness" as a result of audiences' acquaintance and growing knowledge of genre conventions could also be used as evidence of how genres need to reinvent themselves to keep the audience interested.

As I see it, the problem with the theories of genres' life cycles and evolutionary courses is the tendency to use them as descriptions of how genres develop, not as examples of

⁴¹ John G Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation", in Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, p 296

⁴² Besides Schatz, Gallagher also specifically mentions Robert Warshow, John G Cawelti, Philip French, Jack Nachbar, Will Wright, Frank D McConnell and Leo Brady as guilty of more or less the same flaws.

⁴³ Tag Gallagher, "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western Genre", in Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, pp 299-300

⁴⁴ Tag Gallagher, "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral", pp 300-301

how genres *can* develop. Schatz et al might come to some far-fetched conclusions regarding the history of the Western genre, but it does not mean that their observations are useless. As Leger Grindon – championing a more complex view of genre history, where industrial and other external forces are given greater significance – writes in his "Cycles and Clusters: The Shape of Film Genre History":

Though Schatz's developmental categories have been criticized, they can be useful in characterizing a generic cycle. However, they should be used flexibly and allow for greater variety. Rather than being independent formulas straining toward self-realization, film genres evolve in diverse, unpredictable ways. [...] [T]he interaction between social forces and formal design on a film genre is also more pervasive and complex than Schatz allows.⁴⁵

For all its flaws, I still find the theories on genre development to be relevant, but – as Grindon notes – they should be used flexibly, in an eclectic mode.

Genre development of the Satanic cult horror film

How then, if at all, can these contested theories on genre evolution be used to identify what makes *The Conjuring 3* differ from its subgenre companions of the current period? What I aim to do in this section is trying to distinguish the films that can be said to show self-conscious traits from those who don't. My hypothesis is that it is the un-self-consciousness of *The Conjuring 3* that makes the film feel like it gives the threat of Satanic cults more gravity, beyond that of mere horrific entertainment. As I have identified this current wave of films as a third wave of Satanic cult horror films, it would – according to theories of genre life cycles – be appropriate to expect a development in the direction of increasing self-consciousness.

I will go through the films one by one, categorizing them either as self-conscious or not self-conscious. The term "self-conscious" could be debated, but for this task I will persevere in using it, since it is the term best suited to summarize the different aspects of how films in a genre can be said to "behave" in the stage of reshuffling described in the previous section. By self-conscious I mean films that in one or another way "act" as aware of its genre, for example by using parody, pastiche and/or comedy. Additionally, it can be the blending of horror with other genres, creating something that, in the eyes of audience and critics, doesn't fit simply into the horror category alone. Finally, it can also be films where the horror elements are merely used as devices to express social commentary more explicitly than just as

⁴⁵ Leger Grindon, "Cycles and Clusters: The Shape of Genre Film History", in Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, p 52

subtext, something that can also be said to somewhat "disarm" the urgency of the Satanic cult threat in the film in question. There might be other modes of self-consciousness to be found manifested in these films. Also, there might be other ways to interpret the self-consciousness aimed at in the genre development theories. However, as the reader will notice, the my choices are quite adequate for this examination.

The 2017–2021 films

To give an individual account of each of the 16 Satanic cult horror films of 2017-2021 would be tiring for the reader. Therefore, I will put the films I interpret to show significant features of self-consciousness into groups, categorizing them by the ways in which they meet the definitions I have outlined above.

First, there is the parody/pastiche category, of which the most obvious example is the evil child comedy *Little Evil* (Eli Craig, 2017), a film so full of nods to *The Omen* that it is hard not to call it a spoof on the apocalyptic 1976 film. It wears its self-consciousness on its sleeve. As does *Manos Returns* (Tonija Atomic, 2018), the sequel to 1966 film *Manos: The Hands of Fate*, a low budget film directed by a fertilizer salesman, and one of the films often deemed "the worst movie ever made".⁴⁶ While that film might not have been intentionally bad, the sequel is obviously not meant to cater to anything else than fans of the original film in particular, and of extremely low budget exploitation films in general. Its self-reflexivity is even on display in the dialogue, where the characters are discussing which film is the worst ever.

The ultra-low budget film *Stab! Kill! Die!* (Vince D'Amato, 2020) is a gorefest of blood, cannibalism, Satanism and female nudity, fitting into the self-conscious category because it is so obviously nodding to – and trying to outdo – American exploitation films of the 1960s and 1970s on the one hand, and European art house horror of the same period on the other.

In the larger category of genre blending films, we find the gory horror comedy *The Babysitter* (McG, 2017) and its 2020 sequel by the same director, *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*. Each of these can be found on opposite sides of that border between realistic horror and supernatural horror that the Satanic cult horror film crosses back and forth, and that the Satanic Panic as a movement also had an unclear relationship with. *The Babysitter* never

⁴⁶ For example Dalton Ross, "The Worst Movie Ever Made", *Entertainment Weekly* June 6, 2005. ew.com/article/2005/06/06/worst-movie-ever-made/ (retrieved May 10, 2022)

crosses the line into supernatural territory but keeps the threat against the protagonist a realistic threat. In the sequel, however, the powers conjured are shown to be the real deal. Both films are fairly conscious of the audience's knowledge of the tropes of Satanic rituals and sacrificial rites. However, there are not many instances of the film playing with these expectations.

Another horror comedy is *Ready or Not* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin & Tyler Gillett, 2019). The film dwells in the over-the-top characters in an absurd plot, and employs the trope of rich people owing their wealth to the Devil. As does *Satanic Panic* (Chelsea Stardust, 2019), although with more emphasis on the class divide between the Devil worshipers and the working class protagonist. While wallowing in bloody violence, *Satanic Panic* is still first and foremost a comedy, but a comedy using the well-known tropes of rich Devil worshipers in a satiric way; the opening speech at their Satanic get-together could just as well be a sales pep talk at some cult-like company.

The most comedically toned of all the 2017-2021 films is *Todd and the Book of Pure Evil: The End of the End* (Richard Duhaney & Craig David Wallace, 2017), an animated sequel to the tv series *Todd and the Book of Pure Evil* (2010-2012). It is all played for laughs and nausea, and with a self-conscious wink at the – now fairly outdated – notion of the dangers of heavy metal music.

In addition to being a horror comedy, *We Summon the Darkness* (Marc Meyers, 2019) also shows self-consciousness in relation to the Satanic cult subgenre in that it uses the horror elements of the story to make a social commentary on the 1980s Satanic Panic. This, I would say, is an expression of self-consciousness for the sake of reshuffling; instead of using the Satanic cult theme as a horror element, it is used to – unsubtly – sell a political point. This film is therefore categorized as self-conscious through its allegorical mode of using the horror elements for social commentary rather than to scare, unsettle or shock.

The same goes for *Spiral* (Kurtis David Harder, 2019) where a cult leader turns out to be "someone who's been around for a very long time".⁴⁷ He and his cult are planning on putting the blame for their mayhem on the homosexual protagonists. "And not one soul will question it, because of who you are", he tells one of the men in a supervillain style last act revealing-of-the-plan, continuing: "They're afraid of you. And when the tides change, there will be someone else to be afraid of. There always is, there always will be."

⁴⁷ Most likely a hint to the Devil. See Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (1967), or the Rolling Stones song "Sympathy for the Devil", inspired by that novel.

Satan's Slaves (*Pengabdi Setan*, Joko Anwar, 2017) is a remake of Sisworo Gautama Putra's 1982 Indonesian horror film of the same title. This fact alone could be reason enough to label the film self-conscious, at least in a cultural context where the original film is well known. The self-consciousness of this film could also be said to lie in the very adherence to the tradition of occult/supernatural horror, but if that adherence to tradition doesn't make *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* fit in the self-conscious category, then neither will it suffice for this film. The next film however, *The Heretics* (Chad Archibald, 2017), qualifies for the self-conscious category of this survey through its curious mixing of Satanic cult horror with body horror.

Three 2018 films, *Hereditary* (Ari Aster), *In Fabric* (Peter Strickland) and *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino) can be reviewed together, since they all could be labeled as *post-horror*, defined by David Church as "an emerging cycle of independently produced (and potentially profitable) horror films that merge art-cinema style with decentered genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audiovisual shocks and monstrous disgust."⁴⁸ The label (sometimes the more elitist *elevated horror* is used) could be criticized. For example, the merging of horror and art cinema is almost as old as horror cinema itself, but for this survey it is not necessary to further discuss the term. It is the blending of genres that I regard as self-conscious, and the exact term of one of those genres is of lesser concern here.

The last film for examination, Mexican *Belzebuth* (Emilio Portes, 2017) is the most interesting to compare to *The Conjuring 3*. This too is a detective story where supernatural events are investigated, and Satanists seem to be involved in sinister activities. But where the *Conjuring* film stops at the personal, yet spiritual and magical, struggle between the Warrens and the victims on one side and the Satanist and the demon on the other, in *Belzebuth* this is a universal and spiritual battle between good and evil. As the plot of *Belzebuth* unfolds, we learn that the seemingly Satanic cult is in reality a group of Christians and on the same side as the protagonists. Therefore, it is actually the Devil himself, rather than his admirers, that poses a threat in *Belzebuth*. Still, as overtly eschatologically Christian as *Belzebuth* can be read as, it does not appear as much as a propaganda piece for the dangers of the Devil as *The Conjuring 3* does.

The result of this survey, sorting the films into two categories, self-conscious and not self-conscious, is seen in the following division:

⁴⁸ David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*, Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2021, p 1

Self conscious:

Little Evil, The Babysitter, The Babysitter: Killer Queen, Satanic Panic, Ready or Not, Todd and the Book of Pure Evil: The End of the End, Stab! Kill! Die!, We Summon the Darkness, Spiral, The Heretics, Hereditary, In Fabric, Suspiria

Not self-conscious:

The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It, Satan's Slaves, Belzebuth

Two things are obvious from the result; 1) The majority of the films in the 2017-2021 cycle of Satanic cult horror films can be categorized as self-conscious in their use of comedy or pastiche, in their blending of subgenres, or in the use of the horror elements for the purpose of social commentary; and 2) Even as revealing as this survey was, it did not suffice in pinpointing just why the *Conjuring* film differs affectively from the other films, since it was not the only film not to show these traits of self-consciousness.

The Warrens as protagonists

In a short paragraph in his 2008 book *Cinema of the Occult: New Age, Satanism, Wicca, and Spiritualism in Film*, Carroll L Fry notices two common devices in the occult horror film which could be of use in answering my question.

Fry identifies "the doubter" or "the scoffer" as a common device in occult films. This is a character who does not believe in the existence of the supernatural phenomena introduced by the plot. He/she must be convinced, and simultaneously the viewer is 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'".⁴⁹

Another common device Fry points out is the lecture from a character that "establishes the occult frame of reference".⁵⁰ This lecture is commonly held by a character introduced as an expert on the occult, and I will further on call this character type "the expert". The characters of Ed and Lorraine Warren are examples of this narrative device. In the first film of the *Conjuring* franchise, *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013), the Warrens are introduced as paranormal investigators and therefore experts in the occult phenomena

⁴⁹ Carrol L. Fry, *Cinema of the Occult*, p 18. Square brackets are by Fry.

⁵⁰ Ibid

assaulting the protagonists. The film's protagonists, the Perron family, are the ones gradually shedding their doubts along with the viewers, while the Warrens contribute with the expert explanations of the supernatural events.

But in *The Conjuring 3*, the Warrens are the protagonists, the main characters we are invited to identify with. The "doubter" characters are moved to the narrative's periphery (law enforcement, judicial system). The audience is invited to side with the occult experts, and the doubters are mere obstacles in the protagonists' way.

I argue that this has huge implications for the audience's reading of the film. As we are not gradually introduced to the occult phenomena through an expert, but from the very beginning of the film expected to believe in it, we are also expected to share the worldview of the experts. The process of convincing us of the reality of the supernatural is erased through the insertion of the experts as protagonists.

How, then, does *The Conjuring 3* accomplish this? I have answered the question of *why* the film seems to validate the Satanic panic. Now it is time to examine *how* it is done. How the spectator is invited to an *allegiance* with the Warrens.

The structure of sympathy

In his 1994 article "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema", Murray Smith presents his *structure of sympathy*, a systematic explanation of the audience's emotional response to film characters. Smith proposes that "fictional narrations elicit three levels of imaginative engagement with characters, distinct types of responses normally conflated under the term 'identification.' Together, these levels of engagement comprise a structure of sympathy".⁵¹

These three levels Smith terms *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*, which he summarizes as follows:

Most basically, spectators construct characters (a process I refer to as recognition). Spectators are also provided with visual and aural information more or less congruent with that available to characters and so are placed in a certain structure of alignment with characters. In addition, spectators evaluate characters on the basis of the values they embody and hence form more-or-less sympathetic or antipathetic allegiances with them.⁵²

⁵¹ Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema", In *Cinema Journal*, Summer 1994, Vol 33, No 4, p 35

⁵² Ibid

This will soon be further explained, but first we need to differentiate between *central* and *acentral* imagining, two concepts presented by Richard Wollheim, and which are helpful in understanding Smith's structure of sympathy. The difference between the two can be explained as follows: *central imagining* can be expressed in the form of "I imagine", e.g. "I imagine being chased by a monster". *Acentral imagining* can be expressed in the form of "I imagine *that*", e.g. "I imagine *that* I am being chased by a monster". Central imagining implies that I see and feel what I would see and feel when I am being chased by said monster. Acentral imagining does not require that I imaginatively place myself in the scenario so much as I "entertain an idea" of the scenario.⁵³

Smith argues that Christian Metz, in making character identification "secondary" to the "primary" identification with the camera, i.e. identification with the self, is taking an unclear position in relation to the central–acentral distinction:

On the one hand, identification with characters is subordinated, which seems to bring forward an acentral notion; on the other hand, "secondary identification" is conceived of as an extension of identification with the self, which brings us back to central imagining.⁵⁴

Smith then goes on to suggest that much of the work on identification post Metz have emphasized central imagining, although some allow more subjective fluidity than others. For example, Elizabeth Cowie's analysis of *A Reckless Moment* (Max Ophüls, 1949), where she suggests that the spectators identification shifts between the different characters; and Carol Clover's arguing that the contemporary horror film allows identification with both Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf; both allowing far more subjective fluidity than Laura Mulvey's work, which suggests "that classical cinema produces a consistently masculine subject position for the spectator, and this occurs largely through identification with the male protagonist" exemplifies the less.⁵⁵

Noël Carroll on the other hand, Smith argues, suggests that "identification" is a misleading term since it implies that the audience centrally imagine the fictional events as if they were the protagonist. Rather, he argues, the term *assimilation* better describes the interaction between spectator and fictional character.⁵⁶ Smith goes on to quote Carroll

⁵³ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 36

⁵⁴ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 37

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 38

directly, further explaining the problems of identification (which Smith does not entirely agree with) and the point of differentiating between central and acentral imagining:

In order to understand a situation internally, it is not necessary to identify with the protagonist. We need only *have a sense* of why the protagonist's response is appropriate or intelligible to the situation. With respect to horror, we do this readily when monsters appear since, insofar as we share the same culture as the protagonist, we can easily *catch-on to* why the character finds the monster unnatural. However, once we've assimilated the situation from the character's point of view, we respond not simply to the monster, as the character does, but to a situation in which someone, who is horrified, is under attack.⁵⁷

Smith argues that while Carroll insists that all responses to characters are forms of acentral imagining, his own structure of sympathy as a whole is an acentral structure, although drawing on different phenomena that can be labelled as forms of central imagining – or *empathy* rather than *sympathy*: for example, through the startle response in jump scares.⁵⁸

The first level in the structure of sympathy, *recognition*, might easily be overlooked as it is considered obvious, but one only needs to see a film that undercuts recognition, to understand its importance. For recognition, the spectator is required to adapt the *mimetic hypothesis*, that is, while understanding that the characters are fictional, s/he still must assume that the characters' traits are traits which correspond to those s/he can find in real persons.⁵⁹

Alignment describes how the spectator is situated in relation to the characters; what access does s/he have to the characters' actions, thoughts and feelings? Here Smith distinguishes between two functions, *spatial attachment* – if the narrative is restricted to a single character or moves between characters – and *subjective access* – the degree to which we have access to the subjectivity of the characters. "Together these functions control the apportioning of knowledge among characters and the spectator; the systematic regulation of narrative knowledge results in a structure of alignment."⁶⁰

Allegiance, finally, concerns the evaluation of the characters by the spectator, on moral and ideological grounds. This is what is most often meant by "identifying with" a character or a person. Allegiance depends on the spectator "having what s/he takes to be reliable access to the character's state of mind, understanding the context of the character's actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge".⁶¹ This

⁵⁷ Murray Smith, "Altered States", pp38. The quote is from Carroll: *The Philosophy of Horror*. Emphasis by Smith.

⁵⁸ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 39

⁵⁹ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 40

⁶⁰ Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 41

⁶¹ Ibid

evaluation has both cognitive and affective dimensions. For example, "being angry or outraged at an action involves categorizing it as undesirable or harmful to someone or something and being affected – affectively aroused – by this categorization".⁶²

What is important to keep in mind about Smith's structure of sympathy is that it is a cooperative activity; "the concepts of recognition, alignment and allegiance are not just inert textual systems but responses, neither solely in the text nor solely in the spectator".⁶³

Creating allegiance with the Warrens

Skipping the fairly automatic process involved on the level of recognition, I will head right into some scenes important to the level of alignment. Concerning spatial attachment, during most of the film's duration we are mostly in the presence of the Warrens. We see brief scenes of the cursed Arne during the course of the film, but only as a way of showing the escalating graveness of the situation that it is up to the Warrens to solve. Through dialogue between Ed and Lorraine, and between them and other characters, we are given a fair amount of subjective access to the Warrens. We mostly know what they know, and when we witness events they don't, there is soon a phone call or the like, informing them of what just happened. We are also given quite a lot of subjective access to their thoughts and feelings. This, however, is better described in connection with the next level in the structure of sympathy, since these instances are closely intertwined with the devices working to create allegiance.

Already in the very first scene of *The Conjuring 3*, the characters of Ed and Lorraine Warren are given a number of admirable attributes affecting the moral evaluation of their characters by the spectator. During the dramatic exorcism of an eight-year-old boy, the Warrens' authority is underscored by them being totally in command during the ritual – a fact made even clearer as the Catholic priest is quickly and violently incapacitated by a flying dinner plate. During a break in the ritual, Ed says to Lorraine that he cannot remember a case just like the present one, a line illustrating both his authority in the field and his humility before the dark powers they face. In this scene, where Lorraine also brings Ed a cup of coffee asking him if he is feeling alright, the audience also get the first of many glimpses of the mutual concern, understanding, respect and love shared between the couple, underpinned in countless other scenes through glances, comments, questions and actions between the two – and even some flashbacks. The profoundness of their relationship and the depth of their

⁶² Murray Smith, "Altered States", p 41

⁶³ Murray Smith, "Altered States", pp 39-40

understanding for each other are further shown in a scene in a motel room where the couple discuss possible actions to be taken to break the curse put upon Arne. Here, the spectator is kept unknowing of the nature of the actions they discuss, since the Warrens seem to finish each other's thoughts and know exactly what the other means. By making the spectators aware that information is kept from them, the film highlights the bond between the Warrens to both of whom that information is obvious. In other words, the spectator is reminded of the deep understanding between the Warrens through the experience of exclusion from them. The audience's lack of subjective access works to the benefit of the moral evaluation of the characters.

A couple of scenes highlight how the evaluation of the characters has both affective and cognitive dimensions. In one scene the Warrens try to convince Arne's lawyer to plead innocent to the murder on the grounds of "demonic possession"; in the other they try to convince a detective to exchange information on a murder case connected to Arne's case. In the latter, the spectator is invited to take part in the Warrens' frustration with the detective's unwillingness and his doubts of their claims about supernatural forces involved, followed by the triumph when Lorraine passes the detective's test, using her psychic powers to point out the real murder weapon from the two false. The amazed and impressed looks on the other police officers' faces underscore the triumph, followed by a tension easing scene in the car where Lorraine jokingly points out to the detective that the song playing on the radio – Elvis Presley's "Suspicious Minds" – is quite appropriate. The Warrens hold no grudges.

The scene where they try to convince the reluctant lawyer also invites the audience to experience the same frustration as the Warrens. However, there is no triumphant end here. Instead, as the prosecutor decides to go for the death penalty for Arne, it is now up to the Warrens to prove the demonic possession to save the young man's life, setting up the characters' mission in the plot. The audience – who has, after all, seen that the possession is real – is invited to be by their side.

A final example of how the spectator is invited to allegiance with the Warrens is in a scene in the morgue where Lorraine is using her psychic powers to gain knowledge of what happened when a young woman was murdered. The many instances through the film when we share Lorraine's "visions" are all working to allow us subjective access to her, but this scene is also an example of the interplay between central and acentral imagining. Through detailed closeups of the corpse's repulsive hand – pale, swollen, slimy, with yellow nails and bluish spots – the spectator is encouraged not only to imagine *Lorraine* touching the corpse, but to *imagine* touching the corpse themselves.

Concluding remarks

In the last section I argued that the affective difference *The Conjuring 3* shows from its contemporaneous Satanic cult horror films is due to its placing of the character types the "experts" as the film's protagonists. There are, however, some objections that could be made. *The Conjuring 3* is the third *Conjuring* film and the eighth film in the expanded franchise. The Warrens didn't start as protagonists in the first *Conjuring* film, but as important supporting characters in the plot. One could argue that the process of breaking down the spectators' disbelief in the supernatural is quite over and done with by the eighth film. However, it must be possible to analyze individual films on their own merits. A sequel is made not only for those who saw the last entry in the series but goes for as big an audience as possible. That the film's title is *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* and not *The Conjuring 3* would indicate that this is the case.

Another thing I have not discussed is the fact that Ed and Lorraine Warren were real living persons, investigating cases of claimed supernatural activity. How – if at all – does this affect the notion the audience have of the protagonists? This, however, falls outside the scope of this thesis. The real-life Warrens' claims about their cases are – naturally – not to be taken as the truth, and would have to be scrutinized. Also, to examine the real-life Warrens in relation to their filmic versions would be a much larger project, since they and their cases not only are used in the *Conjuring* films, but in *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) and its sequels and remake, *The Haunting in Connecticut* (Peter Cornwell, 2009) and tv film *The Haunted* (Robert Mandel, 1991).

Also, for the sake of clarity, a point should be made about the use of Murray Smith's structure of sympathy. What I argue is that it is the exchange of Fry's character types that makes *The Conjuring 3* differ from its contemporaries. Smith's concept is used to show *how* the film attempts to persuade the spectator into an allegiance with said characters, but it is the fact *that* it does this *with these particular characters* that constitutes its difference from the other films. As the other Satanic cult horror films of this time period do not employ this exchange of character types, a comparison between how *The Conjuring 3* and the other films concerning how they employ the structure of sympathy would be unnecessary.

Regarding my initial hypothesis that it was a lack of self-consciousness in *The Conjuring 3* that produced the differing affective response: even though I had to abandon that hypothesis, it still gave an overall picture of the latest wave in the Satanic cult horror subgenre, clearly showing that the majority of the films do adhere to the applied theories of

genre development. However, it is interesting to note that the financially most successful film, *The Conjuring 3*, is one of the few that do *not* show any signs of self-consciousness, as these theories suggest it would.

Summary

In this study of *The Conjuring 3* and the Satanic cult horror film I started with a feeling, a sense that *The Conjuring 3* differs from its contemporaneous films of its subgenre in that it feels slightly "off"; it appears to belong to another time, sometime during the 1980s or early 1990s, when media and parts of the civil societies in the US and Europe peddled the idea that Satanic cults were preying on, especially, young people.

I began with a quantitative analysis on the history of the Satanic horror film, where I have pointed to three waves – one in the 1970s, another in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and one from the mid 2010s onwards. My hypothesis that there is an upswing in this kind of films right now, and that it has been preceded by earlier upswings, was thus confirmed.

I then narrowed the scope to the latest period, trying to figure out why *The Conjuring 3* feels like it validates the fear of a Satanic threat.

First, adapting an eclectic approach to the slightly differing theories of development of genres, I tried to find out if it is the lack of self-consciousness that makes *The Conjuring 3* differ from the other Satanic cult horror films of its time. By sorting out the films that in different ways and to varying degrees engage in self-consciousness or self-reflexivity, I hoped to find an answer to my question. Unfortunately, I was still left with two other films in addition to my main film of study, both as serious in their approach to the Satanic cult threat as *The Conjuring 3*. Thus, my hypothesis of an increasing self-consciousness in the Satanic cult horror films of the 2010s and 2020s is confirmed. My second hypothesis, that it is the lack of self-consciousness in the *Conjuring* film that produces its affective difference, was proven wrong, since *The Conjuring 3* was not the only film of the 2017-2021 bunch lacking said self-consciousness.

This is when Carrol L Fry's short passage about the characters of "the doubter" and "the expert" commonly used in supernatural horror films came in handy. What *The Conjuring 3* does is that it lets the "experts" become the protagonists, and move the "doubters" to more peripheral roles in the narrative. By inviting the audience to side with the Warrens, the audience is at the same time invited to accept the worldview of the protagonists – a worldview where the universal and spiritual battle between God and Satan is most real, taking place in the

human world like some sort of spiritual hybrid warfare. The protagonists need no persuasion to believe in the threat of Satanism and the supernatural, and therefore the audience's suspension of disbelief is taken for granted rather than obtained through gradual discovery along with a "doubter" protagonist, and with the help of the "expert".

Finally, by using Murray Smith's "structure of sympathy" I showed *how* the spectator is encouraged to an allegiance with Ed and Lorraine Warren, through which the film expects the audience to side with the protagonists, resulting in that "off-ness" I first set out to find the origins of.

What I have argued is that even though the serious, unironic, tone of the film plays its part (together with the "based on actual events" claims of the marketing campaign), the crucial element of *The Conjuring 3* that makes the film feel like a validation of the fear of a Satanic threat is the uncommon placing of the "experts" as the film's protagonists.

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Films

The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It

2021; USA; New Line Cinema, Atomic Monster, The Safran Company

Prod: Peter Safran, James Wan

Dir: Michael Chaves

Wr: David Leslie Johnson-McGoldrick (story & screenplay), James Wan (story)

Cin: Michael Burgess

Ed: Peter Gvozdas, Christian Wagner

Music: Joseph Bishara

Actors: Patrick Wilson (Ed Warren), Vera Farmiga (Lorraine Warren), Ruairi O'Connor (Arne Cheyenne Johnson), Sarah Catherine Hook (Debbie Glatzel), Julian Hilliard (David Glatzel), John Noble (Kastner), Eugenie Bondurant (The Occultist), Shannon Kook (Drew), Ronnie Gene Blevins (Bruno), Keith Arthur Bolden (Sergeant Clay), Steve Coulter (Father Gordon), Vince Pisani (Father Newman)

The Amityville Horror

1979; USA; American International Pictures, Cinema 77, Professional Films

Dir: Stuart Rosenberg

"An Act of Love" (*The Fantastic Journey*, episode 6)

1977; USA; Bruce Lansbury Productions, Columbia Pictures Television

Dir: Virgil W Vogel

Annabelle

2014; USA; New Line Cinema, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, Atomic Monster, The Safran Company

Dir: John R Leonetti

Annabelle Comes Home

2019; USA; New Line Cinema, Atomic Monster, The Safran Company

Dir: Gary Dauberman

Annabelle: Creation

2017; USA; New Line Cinema, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, Atomic Monster, The Safran Company

Dir: David F Sandberg

The Babysitter

2017; USA; Netflix, Boies Schiller Entertainment, Wonderland Sound And Vision

Dir: McG

The Babysitter: Killer Queen

2020; USA; Netflix, Boies Schiller Entertainment, Wonderland Sound And Vision

Dir: McG

The Believers

1987; USA; Orion Pictures

Dir: John Schlesinger

Belzebuth

2017; Mexico; Fidecine, Pastorela Peliculas, UABC

Dir: Emilio Portes

The Black Cat

1934; USA; Universal Pictures

Dir: Edgar G Ulmer

The Blood on Satan's Claw

1971; UK; Tigon British Film Productions, Chilton Films

Dir: Piers Haggard

The Conjuring

2013; USA; New Line Cinema, The Safran Company, Evergreen Media Group

Dir: James Wan

The Conjuring 2

2016; USA; New Line Cinema, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, The Safran Company, Atomic Monster, Evergreen Media Group

Dir: James Wan

The Curse of La Llorona

2019; USA; New Line Cinema, Atomic Monster

Dir: Michael Chaves

The Devil Rides Out

1968; UK; Associated British-Pathé, Hammer Films

Dir: Terence Fisher

”The Devil Worshippers” (20/20)

1985; USA; ABC News

Prod: Peter W Kunhardt & Kenneth Wooden

End of Days

1999; USA; Beacon Communications, Beacon Pictures, Lucifilms

Dir: Peter Hyams

The Exorcist

1973; USA; Warner Bros

Dir: William Friedkin

Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage (Faust: A German Folk Legend)

1926; Germany; Universum Film (UFA)

Dir: FW Murnau

Hail Satan?

2019; USA; Hard Working Movies

Dir: Penny Lane

The Haunted

1991; USA; FNM Films, 20th Television

Dir: Robert Mandel

The Haunting in Connecticut

2009; USA, Canada; Lionsgate, Gold Circle Films, Integrated Films & Management, Manitoba Film and Video Production Tax Credit, Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit (CPTC), Province of British Columbia Production Services Tax Credit

Dir: Peter Cornwell

Hereditary

2018; USA; A24, PalmStar Media, Finch Entertainment, Windy Hill Pictures

Dir: Ari Aster

The Heretics

2017; Canada, Black Fawn Films, Breakthrough Entertainment

Dir: Chad Archibald

In Fabric

2018; UK; Rook Films, BBC Films, BFI Film Fund

Dir: Peter Strickland

Little Evil

2017; USA, Bluegrass Films, Mandalay Pictures

Dir: Eli Craig

Le manoir du diable (The House of the Devil)

1896; France; Georges Méliès, Star-Film

Dir: Georges Méliès

Manos: The Hands of Fate

1966; USA; Norm-Iris, Sun City Films

Dir: Harold P Warren

Manos Returns

2018; USA; Debbie Manos, Roux-Ga-Roux Productions, Skullface Astronaut

Dir: Tonjia Atomic

The Mysteries of Myra

1916; USA; International Film Service, Wharton

Dir: Leopold Wharton, Theodore Wharton

Night of the Demon

1957; UK; Sabre Film Production

Dir: Jacques Tourneur

Night of the Living Dead

1968; USA; Image Ten

Dir: George A Romero

The Ninth Gate

1999; USA, France; Artisan Entertainment, R.P. Productions, Orly Films

Dir: Roman Polanski

The Nun

2018; USA; Atomic Monster, New Line Cinema, The Safran Company

Dir: Corin Hardy

Pengabdi Setan (Satan's Slave)

1982; Indonesia; Rapi Films

Dir: Sisworo Gautama Putra

Poltergeist

1982; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), SLM Production Group

Dir: Tobe Hooper

Prince of Darkness

1987; USA; Alive Films, Larry Franco Productions, Hanuted Machine Productions

Dir: John Carpenter

Race with the Devil

1975; USA; Saber Productions, Twentieth Century Fox

Dir: Jack Starrett

Ready or Not

2019; USA; Fox Searchlight, Mythology Entertainment, Vinson Films

Dir: Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett

Rosemary's Baby

1968; USA; William Castle Productions

Dir: Roman Polanski

Satan's Slaves

2017; Indonesia, South Korea; Rapi Films, CJ Entertainment

Dir: Joko Anwar

"Satan's Witches" (Starsky & Hutch, episode 16, season 3)

1978; USA; Spelling-Goldberg Productions

Dir: Nicholas Sgarro

Satanic Panic

2019; USA; Fangoria, Media Finance Capital

Dir: Chelsea Stardust

The Satanic Rites of Dracula

1973; UK; Hammer Films

Dir: Alan Gibson

The Satanist

1968; USA; Satyr IX Productions

Dir: Zoltan G Spencer

The Seventh Victim

1943; USA; RKO Pictures

Dir: Mark Robson

Spiral

2019; Canada; Digital Interference Productions; Hadron Films

Dir: Kurtis David Harder

Stab! Kill! Die!

2020; Canada; Darkside Releasing

Dir: Vince D'Amato

Stigmata

1999; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), FGM Entertainment

Dir: Rupert Wainwright

Der Student von Prag (The Student of Prague)

1913; Germany; Deutsche Bioscop GmbH

Dir: Stellan Rye

Suspiria

2018; Italy, USA; Frenesy Film Company, VideA, First Sun

Dir: Luca Guadagnino

Todd and the Book of Pure Evil

2010-2012; Canada; Aircraft Pictures, Corvid Pictures, Frantic Films Live Action Productions, Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund

Prod: Shaun Johnson, Anthony Leo, Andrew Rosen, Andrew Rosen, Shawn Watson, Jamie Brown, Sarah Timmins

Todd and the Book of Pure Evil: The End of the End

2017; Canada; Aircraft Pictures, Corvid Pictures, Frantic Films Live Action Productions

Dir: Richard Duhaney, Craig David Wallace

We Summon the Darkness

2019; USA, UK, Canada; Common Enemy, thefyz, Magna Entertainment

Dir: Marc Meyers

The Witch

2015; USA; Parts and Labor, RT Features, Rooks Nest Entertainment, Maiden Voyage Pictures, Mott Street Pictures, Code Red Productions, Scythia Films, Pulse Films, Very Special Projects

Dir: Robert Eggers

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