

POSSESSION IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: RELIGIOUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL THEMES [*DISKUS* 9 (2008)]

Louise Child
School of Religious and Theological Studies
Cardiff University

INTRODUCTION

Challenges to established theory and method proposed within recent debates about spirits and spirit possession have led scholars to explore new links between ethnographic data and broader questions in the academic study of religion. Keller, for example, has drawn attention to flaws in sociological and psychological approaches to possession, and in particular the tendency of these approaches to underestimate the significance the 'radical receptivity' of possessed women's bodies and the power of possessing agents (typically ancestors, deities, and spirits). <1> As a result, she argues, western scholarship tends to observe the bodies of possessed women with a kind of horrified fascination, while at the same time feigning indifference to the things that make possession interesting, including its complex engagement with penetrable personhood. <2> Keller therefore proposes a concept of 'instrumental agency' in order to advance theoretical understandings of spirit possession that reflect more accurately indigenous perspectives. <3> While I believe that studies such as Keller's encourage important advances in the study of possession and related phenomena, her analysis of contemporary western views of possession is largely focused on academic works that tend to treat it as a phenomenon associated with 'the other', whether that be situated historically or geographically. <4> There remains, nonetheless, an area of enquiry that has not yet been fully opened up and this concerns ideas about possession in the popular imagination of people who are unfamiliar with religious traditions that engage with possession trance. This paper aims to explore some of these ideas through an analysis of spirit possession in contemporary cinema, and suggests continuities and differences in themes between this medium and ethnographic studies.

POSSESSION BY DEMONS

At first glance, with the notable exception of *The Exorcist* and *The Devils*, contemporary film appears to ignore possession as a dramatic theme. These films are certainly notable for their explicit attempts to explore fantasies surrounding possession using styles of film-making that aim to convey some kind of historical truth. *The Devils* explores the possession of nuns in seventeenth century Loudun, suggesting (in common with de Certeau's analysis) a strong role for cynical politics, sexual repression, and dramatic flair in the progression of events. <5>

The Exorcist, however, deliberately employs a documentary style to oppose medical and religious models of explaining the peculiar behaviour of a young girl. It is unsettling precisely because the film takes the religious model seriously, thereby suggesting the possible 'reality' and agency of demons. The director, William Friedkin, makes this explicit in an introduction to *The Exorcist* on DVD. This suggests that the film is about the 'mystery of faith' and that it 'strongly and realistically tries to make the case for spiritual forces in the universe both good and evil'.

Part of this claim rests on Friedkin's reference to instances of possession thought to have taken place in the contemporary west that constituted part of his research. However, the contention that *The Exorcist* is more of a documentary than a drama is seriously undercut by the extreme ways in which it also draws from the fantasies of spectators with regard to the body of the possessed person. For example, revulsion is evoked through Regan's vomiting of green slime. Creed explores such cinematic devices through the lens of Kristeva's work on the ways in which women become associated, in the collective imagination, with the 'powers of horror', <6> one aspect of which is abjection, a complex notion that Kristeva identifies as being bound up with the pleasures and terrors of the maternal bond, both of which derive from the idea that the borders and limits of the individual might be transgressed or even consumed by her. Acts or substances that violate the boundaries of the body, such as pus, are therefore often abject, connecting abjection with the vomiting reflex and reactions such as food loathing. According to Creed, 'the body ejects these substances, at the same time extricating itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live'. <7> On a social level, 'ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process'. <8> Creed goes on to argue that 'definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest'. <9> Ironically, in the case of *The Exorcist* the claim that the film has continuity with actual possessions is undermined by its insistence that the girl Regan and the demons possessing her are completely distinct, she has no 'instrumental agency' in Keller's sense of the term. According to Creed, this position is brought about by the film seeking to 'cover over the explosive issue that it has laid bare', namely a daughter expressing incestuous desires towards her mother, a taboo rarely explored even in horror films. <10>

THE 'METAPHORICAL' ROLE OF SPIRITS IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

While the reality of evil spirits is central to *The Exorcist*, the question is also explored in other genres of film. For example, *Ghost* is a romance that suggests that emotional forces and attachments, together with unresolved conflicts, may hold a person in between the worlds of the living and the dead. In this film, Sam Wheat becomes a ghost when he is shot in the street, but chooses to remain within the realm of the living out of love for his wife Molly and because he fears for her safety. Upon Wheat's death, lights descend on his body and appear to be attracting him in their direction, while the death of evil characters shows contrasting shadow-like creatures dragging their victim's souls away. Sam learns that, rather than being accidentally shot by a mugger, he was murdered by someone who was hired by his friend Carl (who is laundering money at the bank where he and Sam work) to retrieve a computer code. The continuing search for the code places Molly in danger and Sam, searching for a way to warn her, stumbles across a con artist posing as a psychic, Oda Mae Brown, only to find that she overhears his sarcastic comments about her overacting. The suspension of disbelief in this film is thereby combined with its comic elements through a charlatan spirit medium who discovers that she actually can communicate with the dead, and be possessed by them. Interestingly, although this film makes

fewer claims to resemble real encounters with spirits than, for example, *The Exorcist*, there are features that seem to be closer to ethnographic accounts of spirit possession the medium is able to negotiate to a certain extent with the spirit and allows her body to be borrowed for certain purposes, such as allowing Sam to touch Molly.

What this suggests about contemporary western attitudes to possession is debateable. It could be argued that such films are employing possession in a metaphorical sense that allows a temporary belief in ghosts to enable the audience to explore the dimensions of human love using imagery which still holds power over the imagination, but which is not necessarily part of explanatory processes in the everyday contemporary west. This temporary belief, moreover, engages with more sceptical viewpoints in *Ghost*. Molly is convinced only gradually of Oda Mae's sincerity, initially by her references to things only Sam and Molly would know about, and finally by Sam's ability to move objects (in this case a penny). Between these events, both the police and Carl express other views, including the idea that grief makes people vulnerable and spirit mediums take advantage of this.

THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

This proposition, that ghosts in film are simply a manifestation of redundant ideas, could be analysed using the notion of the uncanny in the sense suggested by Freud's analysis. For Freud, the uncanny is frightening because it is a sense of something both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, something that "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light". <11> He goes on to describe two inter-related kinds of repressed material that might come to light in this connection, the first being related to the unconscious processes of the individual mind, in particular those related to emotions and experiences of childhood <12> and the second being more related to Freud's proposition that western society as a whole has undergone certain evolutionary processes that have led, under ordinary circumstances, to a greater scepticism about the existence of spirits than is in evidence in societies that Freud describes as 'primitive'. However, more concrete encounters with death may have a strong emotional impact and awaken feelings of dread or hope in relation to the possibility of the return of the dead as spirits or ghosts. <13> Taking as examples accounts of uncanny experiences such as wishing someone dead who dies a few days later, or thinking of someone who one meets accidentally shortly afterwards, Freud argues that,

these last examples of the uncanny are to be referred to the principle which I have called 'omnipotence of thoughts', taking the name from an expression used by one of my patients. And now we find ourselves on old familiar ground. Our analysis of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe. This was characterised by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or 'mana'; as well as by all the other creations with the help of man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men, that none

of us has passed through it without preserving certain traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as ‘uncanny’ fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. <14>

If Freud’s analysis is correct, than it would follow that images of possession in fantasy films are effective largely because they engage with ideas and emotions that are rarely acknowledged in contemporary society, but which, nonetheless, retain a degree of power. Carroll’s treatment of horror films is useful in this regard, as he explores theories that suggest that the pleasures of emotional excitation that such performances generate are made possible by a kind of suspension of disbelief that retains certain limits, allowing the viewer to make leaps of imaginative exploration within the context of the film, without necessarily applying the same principles to every-day life. <15> While this kind of approach has some attractions, particularly as there appear to be more examples of possession in cinema than in other contexts of contemporary western life, it may also be self-limiting if fascination with possession phenomena is regarded as nothing more than the psychological equivalent of an appendix, a functionally redundant anomaly connected to our evolutionary past.

Such a view, however, is seriously challenged by contemporary ethnographic studies in indigenous contexts. Placido (2001), for example, in the context of her study of the Venezuelan cult of Maria Lionza, explores ways in which a number of modern media, including anthropological writings, documentaries and contemporary cinema, are utilized by mediums and their circle of believers. On one level, this use helps to shape the characters of ‘spirit persons’ in the context of a particular medium and the circumstances surrounding him or her. This is possible because,

Unlike the Catholic saints and the Santeria Orishas with whom they are often compared, spirits have very undefined identities. Everything about the spirits – even the Three Powers, Maria Lionza, el Negro Felipe, and el Indio Guaicaipuro – is very vague...the spirits are general characters, and it is up to mediums and believers to transform them into social persons with a particular identity. <16>

While anthropological books and films might inform this process, it is far from a one way flow of information. On the contrary, “when the spirits descend...they not only affirm or reject the knowledge and information mediums have acquired through books and videos, they often give new stories and unknown versions of the events and thus provide people with new knowledge about them. Many of these new tales and stories then appear in the books that researchers produce on the basis of information acquired through contact with spirits”. <17> This sense that the spirit’s identity is somehow negotiated with, rather than simply imposed upon, the medium can also extend to the way in which the medium is entered because the spirit may be ‘brought down’ or led into the medium if they have sufficient skill. <18> I mentioned this skill earlier in the context of the film *Ghost*, and this film is another source from which mediums and believers draw to explore spirit phenomena. Placido explains this in connection with her argument that anthropologists tend to emphasize the form of spirit possession as an activity, rather than focusing on what is actually said during possessions. The speech content is, however, of paramount importance to believers,

Spirits love talking. In fact they are desperate to speak because, mediums and believers insist, spirits need to speak in order to 'exist'. The idea that spirits could be wandering around without being able to express themselves is a cause of great worry and distress for many of those who believe in them. Virginia, a believer, offered a clear explanation of this, as she burst into tears while we were watching the film *Ghost*. The tape of this film had been rented for me to watch so that I would understand better what spirit-human relations are like. *Ghost* was considered very accurate at describing those relations. It is about a young man, killed by someone he knows, who desperately tries, once he has become a spirit, to find a medium, to communicate with his fiancée, who is in danger of being killed by the same man. *Ghost* was a cult movie (in more than one sense) among some mediums and believers I met: they had learned bits of it by heart and they were very keen that I should understand how terribly difficult it is for the spirits to be heard, seen, and felt; that is, to exist. <19>

Moreover, possession, far from fading from view, may play important roles in a community's response to economic and political changes generated by encounters with modernity, and may be part of a dynamic engagement with the past. <20> Lambek, for example, uses Aristotle's concept of poiesis to explore spirit possession in Madagascar, because this concept suggests that history making can be both objective and creative simultaneously. <21> Thus, 'if becoming possessed is a kind of mimetic surrender to history, when the spirits rise they are understood as rational historical agents'. <22> Lambek questions sharp distinctions between the mythical and the real, partly because such distinctions miss the diversity of cultural forms, but also because 'the commonsense "real" world itself is culturally constituted and to a degree contingent and variable'. <23>

CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE MEDIUM AND THE POSSESSING AGENT?

I would therefore suggest a more open-ended line of inquiry that compares the treatment of certain themes in popular contemporary media on the one hand, and in ethnographic studies on the other. For example, the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* constructs the vampire myth in a way that categorizes it as a kind of possession phenomenon. What I mean by this is that a vampire is seen as a demon being that inhabits a human body. This construction has an impact on the ethical behaviour of the characters in the series. For example, killing vampires is an important part of Buffy's heroic identity, but her refraining from killing humans is equally important, an idea that is explored in some detail when a second vampire slayer, Faith, commits murder and enters a serious emotional and spiritual decline as a result (*Bad Girls*). In addition, the series explores questions that are also of great interest in ethnographic debates, such as the issue of whether the possessing agent may have some tendencies in common with the person being possessed. In one episode (*The Wish*) Cordelia, hurt by her discovery of her boyfriend Xander's affair with Willow, wishes that Buffy had never come to Sunnydale. Her wish is granted by a vengeance demon called Anyanka and she is transported into an alternate reality in which Buffy has not come to Sunnydale, many of her friends are dead, and Xander and Willow have been turned into sadistic vampires (and much to Cordelia's chagrin are still together)! This alternative reality is only dissolved when Anyanka's 'power centre', an amulet, is broken by Giles. In a subsequent episode (*Doppelgangland*), Anyanka attempts to regain her powers by tricking Willow into performing a spell

with her that links them with the alternate reality, in the hope of retrieving the amulet. Instead, 'Vampire Willow' enters the 'normal' Buffy-verse and Willow meets her 'self', transformed by vampiric possession. Willow, a normally rather excessively conventional student, engages with a version of herself that is not only sadistic but also exhibits an interest in lesbian sexuality. Once the vampire is captured she discusses her discomfort with her friends, and Buffy tries to reassure her by suggesting that the vampire's personality has nothing to do 'with the person that was', whereupon Angel (a character whose insight is complicated by the fact that he is a vampire who has had his soul returned to him) remarks "well actually....". Later, in the fourth series, Willow does embark upon a lesbian relationship, and when her partner is murdered, she realises a capacity for extreme sadism when taking her revenge, using a phrase her vampire self was fond of as a prelude to violence – 'bored now' (Villains).

Sexuality is also an example used by ethnographic writers exploring the question of whether there are characteristics in common between a possessed person and the possessing agent. In studies informed by psychological models of possession it may be suggested that possession allows someone to act out desires and emotions, including homosexual desire, which might otherwise be repressed either by society's disapproval or their own personal conflicts. McCarthy Brown seems to take a more pragmatic approach to the same question. She explores a number of forms of Ezili, a female deity of Haitian Vodou, and argues that the social circumstances and personal preferences of the spirit medium may have an impact on which spirits are more likely to frequently manifest within that person. She suggests that,

Alourdes and her spirits create one another, a relationship recognized within her Vodou family, where someone is as likely to speak about "Alourde's Danto" as about Ezili Danto in general. Alourdes is a heterosexual woman, in mid life, who grew up in Port-au-Prince and has lived in the United States for twenty-five years. Her situation as a woman relating to the three Ezili is naturally different from that of a man relating to mother and lover figures. Her heterosexuality suppresses the acknowledged lesbian dimension of Ezili Danto, a part of the lwa's character that could be very important for other women. <24>

Gender and sexuality are also important themes in *Practical Magic*, a film that illustrates well ways in which highly contemporary themes can be explored in a film that nonetheless uses extremely potent possession imagery. The film focuses on two sisters, Sally and Gillian, who possess magical powers but are ambivalent about using them. This bringing together of the themes of sisterhood and magic is also found within the television series *Charmed* and may be a reflection of the way in which magical practices have become associated with feminism in the contemporary west. Both women have problems with their personal relationships, Sally enjoys a happy marriage that is suddenly cut short by her husband's accidental death, while Gillian's more rebellious nature leads her to indulge in a passionate relationship with her boyfriend, Jimmy. This relationship has a violent dark side that spins out of control when he tries to kill Gillian. She calls on Sally for help, and when she administers an overdose of belladonna in an attempt to render Jimmy unconscious, he is killed. In fear of the consequences of murder, the women attempt to bring him back from the dead, but unable to control the 'dark and un-natural' manifestation, kill him a second

time and bury him in the garden. This is, however, not the end of the matter and his spirit continues to trouble the sisters and Gillian in particular, eventually possessing her – and - to borrow a phrase from the film – “squatting inside her like a toad”. This possession is clearly a metaphor for his control over Gillian’s emotions and state of mind, something implied by the way in which the supernatural situation is described in western terms by other women called upon to help with the exorcism. They use phrases such as, “apparently her sister just got out of a very bad relationship and now the guy just will not leave her alone” and her admittance to magical abilities is described as “coming out”.

While one reading of the possession metaphor focuses on the psychological hold that Jimmy exercises on Gillian, a second reading can suggest that the experiences of both sisters actually explore Sally’s psychological condition following her husband’s death. Her initial shock and disbelief is expressed in a request to her aunts to resurrect her husband, but they refuse on the grounds that while the returning entity might superficially appear to be him, the reality would be something “dark and unnatural”. Sally accepts this explanation and continues her grieving with a period of time in bed, where Gillian finds her and encourages her to continue with her life and care for her children. Later in the film, Sally shows some hesitation in her budding romance with a policeman, but the darker aspects of her emotional state can best be regarded in the light of the parallel story of Gillian’s relationship with Jimmy. Firstly when Sally kills Jimmy, and secondly when they use the resurrection spell that was Sally’s first impulse when her husband died. This is partly justified by the fact that Jimmy always was “dark and unnatural”, but his resurrected self is unmanageable and Sally is compelled to kill him a second time, whereupon he haunts the girls and possesses Gillian. Jimmy’s disappearance brings the policeman into Sally’s life and the haunting therefore takes place at the same time as her struggle with the challenges of forming a new relationship. Moreover, it can also be suggested that stories that portray the dead’s hold over the living explore a kind of transference stimulated by the ways in which survivors may become locked into a series of problematic emotions concerning their dead. Attig, for example, refers to the way in which grief often causes a person to hesitate, withdrawing from their normal social world, and experiencing the emotional pain associated with a longing for the return of the deceased. <25> However, he clearly distinguishes between the most immediate emotion of grief and the long term process of grieving which he suggests is an active learning to live in a world in which the deceased is absent.

When mourners go on as if a temporary retreat from reality is a sustainable posture in the world, they do something far different from temporarily indulging a wish that the world were other than it is. Grief leads some mourners to long for the return of the deceased in a way that if it persists, becomes irrational and dangerous. When they enter what I call extreme grief emotion, their disposition to expect, and their quite rational wish for, the presence of the deceased becomes a fervent, pervasive, preoccupying, and irrational desire. As they wholeheartedly and persistently desire the impossible and dwell in intense longing for what is irretrievably lost and recognized by them to be so, they experience something far different from ordinary grief...a suppression of the belief and a consequent refusal to face and come to terms with death’s reality. <26>

From this perspective, Jimmy's possession of Gillian may also be a metaphor for Sally's battle with the attractions of extreme grief, and the way that the sisters reaffirm bonds with each other and their wider social world is therefore given additional significance. An episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* explores grief in a similar way. When Buffy's mother dies, Dawn (Buffy's sister) performs a resurrection spell that she finds in one of Giles's books, ignoring warnings from Tara that such spells should never be cast because there are some aspects of the natural order of the universe that can never really be changed, and from a practitioner of dark magic that Joyce may come back exactly as she was. When a conversation with Buffy reconciles Dawn with her sister, Dawn breaks the spell by tearing through a photograph of her mother just before the being she has conjured knocks on the door. Such storylines may in part reflect ideas held within contemporary pagan witchcraft circles, including the idea that magic is a legitimate force in certain circumstances, but potentially dangerous in others. However, there is also a sense that grieving persons are psychologically vulnerable, and this idea contributes to suspicions of mediumship activity in the contemporary west.

This kind of scepticism is explored in the series *Afterlife*. Set in Bristol, the programme revolves around two principal characters: Alison, a reluctant spirit medium, and Robert, a university psychologist who makes her the subject of his research publication. Early in the first episode, Robert explains ways in which fake mediums can elicit information from clients through 'cold reading', a kind of detailed, but wholly material form of observation, and takes them "into the belly of the beast" (a psychic evening in Clifton). Alison, however, defies expectations on several counts. She continues with her detailed description of a spirit standing behind one of the students, although the student gives her no encouragement, and Alison does not really want to accept money for her services. Most importantly, she asserts that she has no control over which spirits she sees, "I'm not in charge you see. They are". This notion continues to be an important theme in the discourse between her and Robert, not least because Alison has spent time in hospital with mental health problems. She explains that medication does not work, saying "I don't have any choice. You don't choose the spirits, they choose you". Moreover, in ways reminiscent of Keller's argument, she asserts the agency of the spirits in a way that suggests that it is not only the living that need resolution but also the dead, and that sometimes there can be conflict between the two. This is dramatically illustrated in the case of Robert's student, the sole survivor of a family suicide pact. Although initially Alison believes that the spirit of this girl's mother wants to see her daughter move on, the reality is that this spirit is only satisfied when the daughter also commits suicide (*More Than Meets the Eye*). This idea, that spirits may envy the living and may try to take them with them into death, is also recorded in ethnographic studies, and is a particular concern when people dream about a dead person. Stephen, for example, describes Mekeo ideas about a dream-self, which, when it leaves the body,

is exposed to many potential dangers. It encounters the dream-selves of other living people, of the dead, and of spirit beings such as the water spirits, all of which may try to influence, control, or destroy it. If a person's dream-self accepts food offered by dead relatives, or their embraces, or agrees to leave with them on some journey, the bodily self will wither and perish; if it refuses, no harm will be done. <27>

The agency of the dead is an important part of the tension between Alison and Robert, because while Robert wants to examine Alison (and her 'delusions') from a critical distance she insists on a more personal engagement, based on her ability to see and communicate with Robert's dead son. Robert resents the possibility that she is manipulating him, a concern that is shared by his ex-wife (Jude) and his friend (Barbara) who both feel that involvement with a medium will hinder, rather than help, his grieving process, and he argues with Alison about which one of them is in denial (*Lower Than Bones*). The problems between them come to a head when it appears that Alison has been deceived by a journalist who stages a haunting in a flat in which no-one has died. Alison has seen spirits committing a murder in the flat and will not relinquish her perceptions although they fly in the face of the facts. Robert becomes impatient with her insistence, saying that "the truth is you don't want to be helped do you? You don't want the spirits to leave you alone", whereupon Alison replies, "No. They won't leave me alone. Your dead son won't leave me alone!" (*Sleeping with the Dead*). The conflict is only finally resolved during a séance in the final episode of the series, where Alison is possessed by Josh. Once the boy and his father are reconciled Josh feels that he can move on but tries to take Alison with him and she falls into a coma.

This emphasis on the agency of the spirits and the conflicts of this world-view with psychological perspectives is also discussed by Vitebsky in the context of his ethnographic study of the Sora people of eastern India. Here, the medium provides a vehicle through which the dead can engage in lengthy, often painful dialogues with their living relatives, in which

speakers persuade, cajole, tease, remind, deceive, and plead with one another. Dialogues represent a mutual quest for awareness about the other person's state of mind. At the same time, they are the medium through which each person's being is constantly moulded. Living and dead people cause each other to do things through dialogues at the same time as they themselves are changed by these encounters. Each person is an agent, but at the same time is acted upon and does not simply return to his or her previous state. <28>

Vitebsky contrasts this process with the ideas laid out in Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1957 [1917]), suggesting that there is no room for the agency of the dead in Freud's model, there is simply normal mourning (in which the bereaved person withdraws libido from the beloved person, having accepted their loss) or melancholia (when the bereaved person cannot accept the death and loses interest in staying alive). <29> There are similarities between Sora thinking and Freud's ideas, including

a comparable intense attachment, based on memory, between the bereaved and the deceased; a comparable gradual, painful withdrawal which eventually leaves the successful mourner 'free'; an ambivalence between compassion and hostility; a risk of shared fate through an identification between the two parties; and, where the entire process fails, a comparable loss of the will or ability to live. <30>

However, for the Sora, 'the deceased does continue to exist. But he does so in a way which modifies the dynamics of his relationship to the living since these dynamics are

not the same as when both parties were still alive...Freud reverses the Sora model and takes the initiative out of the hands of the dead...it is not the Sora mourner who finds it difficult to “abandon a libidinal position” <31> but the deceased. Indeed, the dead may even be more articulate than the bereaved about their sense of loss’. <32>

SPIRITS AND PREJUDICE

While a series such as *Afterlife* presents debates about the existence of spirits largely in terms of their intellectual and emotional implications, the setting of the series within surroundings relatively familiar to the audience may obscure another important facet to the ways in which ideas about possession have been shaped in the contemporary west. McCarthy-Brown, for example, suggests that there is a great deal of prejudice about Vodou in America which is

derived mainly from its portrayal in novels, films, and television, where images of sorcerers, zombi, snakes, blood, and violence abound. In the United States, the word voodoo is used in a casual and derogatory way to indicate anything on a spectrum from the deceptive to the downright evil. If it were not so clear that racism underlies these distortions, it would be hard to understand why this kind of stereotyping is tolerated for an African-based religion when it would not be tolerated for other religions. The negative portrayal of Vodou in the press, in novels, and in travellers’ accounts began in earnest shortly after the Haitian slaves won their freedom, a period in which slavery was still practiced in the United States and in many European colonies. The argument was often explicitly made that Haitians were incapable of governing themselves - an argument used by the United States and several countries in Europe to justify their refusal to recognize the fledgling black republic. <33>

It could be argued that a key example of this kind of portrayal occurs in *Live and Let Die*, a film in which the British Secret Service agent, James Bond (007) investigates a cluster of related murders in New Orleans and San Monique (a fictional island somewhere in the Caribbean). The opening scenes make explicit connections between the religious practices of Africans and African-Americans and criminal activities by showing a sequence of three murders. The first takes place in the UN, where shots of the San Monique delegates are inter-woven with the murder of the UK delegate. The second takes place in New Orleans, where a grieving funeral procession distracts an American agent, who is murdered, placed in the procession coffin, and carried away by the mourners who now express jubilation, dancing with brightly coloured feather parasols. The third is set on the island of San Monique, where the victim is tied between two posts, surrounded by dancers in white and is administered a lethal snake bite by a dancer wearing a ram’s head, the implication being that this is some kind of sacrificial Vodou ritual. The idea is re-enforced when Bond looks around the American ‘OH CULT VODOO SHOP’ and sees a row of skulls for sale with a notice underneath stating “These are sold for rituals”. Bond negotiates this world with a kind of cynical nonchalance, stating at one point, “Vodou land was just poppy fields...a simple matter of heroin smuggling”.

Moreover, the connections between the Caribbean and America, and the idea that Vodou is simply a disguise for criminal activity is made even more explicit by the revelation that Dr. Kananga, the Prime Minister of and UN representative for San

Monique, and Mr Big, a leader in the American criminal underworld, are one and the same person (Mr Big is a disguise).

In addition, the way that the relationship between gender and power is portrayed is highly ambiguous. This is not, in itself, surprising (given the genre), but it is of interest here because it is bound up with some ideas about mediumship that require further examination. Initially the female lead (a character called Solitaire) is associated with Kananga, sitting with him in his official UN function and reading the tarot cards for him as an aid to his criminal activities. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that although her clairvoyance is regarded as a useful tool, it does not appear to give her any personal power. Kananga, for example, says, “let us hope these temporary lapses do not become a habit. Your power exists to serve me and it is mine to control. If and when the time comes when I decide you are to lose it...I myself will take it away”. Later on, having been seduced by Bond, Solitaire does lose her power, explaining that, “the High Priestess is wife to the prince no longer of this world...the spiritual bridge to the secret church. It’s my fate. By compelling me to earthly love the gods themselves have taken away my powers”. During subsequent scenes both Bond and Kananga refer to Solitaire as an object, for example Bond remarks to a colleague, “this is a valuable piece of merchandise we are carrying which with any luck they’ll want back” and when Dr. Kananga recovers Solitaire and captures Bond he asks him, “did you mess with that?”

While according to McCarthy Brown, ‘Haitian culture is a misogynist culture’ and ‘Vodou has not escaped the influence of this attitude. Certain oungan, for example, are notorious for mistreating, in various ways, the women who become ounsi (ritual assistants) in their temples’, nonetheless ‘Vodou empowers women to a larger extent than the great majority of the world’s religious traditions’. <34> This is in part because Vodou is a highly flexible system which adapts to people’s needs in times of difficulty and social change, both in the broad sense (such as when women gain a more prominent place in the growing urbanization of Haiti and the urban contexts of the Diaspora) <35> and in the ways that rituals are often tailored to meet specific individual needs for empowerment in difficult situations, such as when Cecile, a woman unhappy about her husband’s infidelity, is instructed to hold a ritual plant and say (not beg for) what she wants. <36> A relationship with the spirits, therefore, although characterised on one level as ‘service’, does not turn practitioners into victims. ‘Those who serve the spirits do not fall on their knees and implore a god to solve their problems for them. A Vodou spirit is not a deus ex machina but a catalyst who mobilizes the will and energy of human beings’ <37> There is, however, a grain of truth in the idea that mediumship may involve a kind of marriage to the spirits, but this does not preclude human relationships totally, rather ‘in these rituals, individuals pledge loyalty, service, and even sexual fidelity for one night each week (sleeping with no human on that night and waiting to receive the spirit in their dreams) in return for the spirit’s increased care and protection’. <38>

More compelling in their resonance with Vodou are Live and Let Die’s references to Baron Samedi, described (fairly accurately as it happens) in a tourist’s show located at Bond’s hotel as “Vodou god of the cemeteries and leader of the dead”. While Dr. Kananga does not himself personify this figure, one of his close associates does. Moreover, Bond receives a ‘warning’ in the form of a black hat (often worn by Baron Samedi) with a bloodied chicken feather in it. While there is some truth to the idea

that Baron Samdi does combine ideas about the grim realities of death with sexuality and humour, the emphasis on the sinister in the film's portrayal contrasts with accounts of rituals in which he possesses participants. This is partly because Baron Samdi is only one of several Gede (spirits of the dead). When he possesses Alourdes,

he arrives as a corpse; his body falls to the ground, stiff. In a mood of solemnity and sadness, the people surround him, bind his jaw with a white cloth, stuff his nostrils and ears with cotton, and powder his face to reproduce the pallor of a cadaver...the tense psychodrama of death ends only when time doubles back on itself, when Ti Malis displaces Baron and a childish giggle escapes from the mouth of the corpse. Then, and only then, does the tension snap and the fun begins. <39>

It is Ti Malis, therefore, who incarnates the more humorous and sexually explicit aspects of the Gede, and the purpose of this is in part to explore these aspects of physical reality in a society where his speech and acts would normally be forbidden as discretion and proper behaviour are highly valued. <40>

However, the idea that Baron Samdi has been misused by powerful regimes is not entirely inaccurate. As Schmidt points out, Vodou (in common with many religious traditions) has also been appropriated by powerful persons within the Haitian nation so that regimes which utilized other techniques of terror (such as beating, torture, rape and assassination) were able, in addition, to create a sense of terror through fears of supernatural attack. <41> While this was achieved partly through an association of the secret police (known as Tonton Macutes) with some Vodou priests, more significant than concrete connections between the two were the ways in which the Duvalier regimes (François Duvalier was president 1957-1971 and Jean-Claude Duvalier 1971-1986) utilized highly charged symbols to create associations in the minds of the populace. This was most powerfully done through the person of François Duvalier himself, who although publicly a Catholic, fostered rumours that he was also a powerful Oungan (vodou priest). <42> Moreover, Duvalier dressed and behaved in ways that enabled him to create a persona reminiscent of Baron Samdi, a leader of a group of spirits (loa) called Gede who control the border between life and death. <43> Quoting Johnson <44> Schmidt explains that he dressed in 'a black hat, glasses, and cane as a Gede...and even speaking in that spirit's nasal tones, was a bridge that linked representations of religious power and national authoritarian power'. <45> Nonetheless, Schmidt points out that it is important not to confuse an appropriation of a religious tradition with the tradition itself.

In order to separate Vodou from its negative image, one has to show that the religion had little to do with the Duvalier regime and the way it suppressed opponents. Vodou is a widespread system of beliefs and practices...to reduce it to 'black magic' would be a late victory for the Tonton Macutes, and also of the slave holders who were responsible for the initial creation of Vodou as magic, and it would be unjust to all the peaceful people who serve the spirits. <46>

CONCLUSION

At first glance, it may seem that spirit possession, as a theme in contemporary film, is used simply as a metaphor through which human emotions, such as grief, anger, and

love, can be explored. In other words, a psychological, rather than a religious narrative, appears to be dominant. From this viewpoint, storylines that contain tensions between psychological and religious explanations for spirit phenomena (for example in *Ghost*) largely serve as a bridge between a highly sceptical western world in which ghosts are not thought to exist and a suspension of disbelief that temporarily gives the imagination free reign to engage with its evolutionary past. The postmodern irony with which the characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comment upon the metaphor while simultaneously fighting 'real' demons is a case in point.

I nonetheless argue in this paper for a more nuanced comparison between the portrayal of spirit possession in contemporary film and ethnographic and historical accounts of this phenomenon. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which these media explore the relationship between the possessed person and the possessing agent, arguing that, for example, *The Exorcist*, is discontinuous with many accounts of possession phenomena because it portrays the possession as entirely involuntary and the possessing agent as having nothing in common with its host. There are, however, elements in *The Exorcist* that resonate with early modern phenomena. While I have used Creed's analysis to suggest ways in which the vomiting motif is used to evoke horror in the film Sluhovsky (2007) refers to the practice of keeping objects that had been vomited by the possessed, including bits of glass and skins of lizards and toads, in a church in Vic-sur-Seille (France). While such objects were in evidence in the 1520s, they were less so in the seventeenth century as the exorcists were ordered to burn them. <47> Moreover, the idea, in evidence in *The Exorcist*, that conversing with the demon is dangerous, was also expressed by early modern theologians, notably Ciruelo in 1530. <48>

It is also important to note that the portrayal of an engagement with spirits in contemporary film is most often characterised as contact of some kind with deceased human beings and the debates about its potential truth and value are therefore often informed by ideas about bereavement and grieving influenced by popular conceptions of psychological discourse. These ideas point to the dangers of fake mediumship and the vulnerability of mourners, for example. In contrast, many ethnographic studies of possession refer to possession by spirits or ancestors who play a role similar to that of deities and whose importance to the community at large is therefore easier to apprehend. Ben-Amos, for example, in her exploration of the Olokun cult among the Edo in Benin City, Nigeria, argues (counter to Lewis's (1971) theories about possession) that 'women's religious associations are not necessarily peripheral or low in status. On the contrary, worship of Olokun is at the very centre of Edo cosmology and has a major part in ongoing religious practices...the status that urban Edo women achieve in this cult is permanent not temporary, and the psychological benefits of participation are not temporary outlets but a real redefinition of self'. <49> This is because the mediums are in touch with a deity (Olokun) thought to rule a spiritual kingdom under the sea, a representation of power that mirrors and at times acts as a balancing force with regard to temporal power. <50> This engagement with collective forces and ideas is an important part of the continuing vitality and success of spirit mediumship in ethnographic contexts and is less obviously present in contemporary film.

In *Afterlife*, for example, possession itself is portrayed only rarely, and is focused on spirits that have a very personal connection to people Alison encounters. Her

engagement is much more often shown as being able to hear and see spirit persons (who look much like living persons). Nonetheless, it is suggested that in addition to her natural gifts her mediumship has been propelled by the suffering of a near-death experience during a train crash, and this notion, that practitioners are called by the spirits through suffering, is also found in ethnographic accounts. <51> Moreover, studies of contemporary Spiritualism such as that of Wallis <52> suggest that extreme grief may be discouraged rather than encouraged by western mediums, and that while the opportunity to converse with dead relatives may be an initial attraction to the movement, there are other factors that sustain the interest of long term members, including its philosophical ideas and the sense of belonging to the community of attendees. <53>

This emphasis on community, rather than individual, contexts for possession, is therefore an important point of contrast between possession as encountered in fieldwork accounts and that found in contemporary film, a contrast that is closely linked with the ways that films and serial dramas often incorporate (explicitly or implicitly) some kind of psychological discourse. However, while this difference in emphasis might initially suggest that psychology has replaced religious or supernatural thinking, I would suggest that the relationship between the two is a more subtle and ambivalent dialogue, played out between the characters in films such as *Ghost* and *Afterlife*. Perhaps one reason that spirits continue to fascinate is their enduring, and highly adaptable, relationship with the collective imagination.

NOTES

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