Excorio: Cursed Films, Haunted Props, and Fictional Reality

Racheal Bruce
Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Excorio engages the horror genre and the history of cursed films through a series of visuals. These visuals act as a container for a fictional lost horror film from 1979, also titled Excorio. The project’s goal is to employ the props, advertisements, and other artifacts to describe the film’s narrative and ultimate demise. The presentation sets up an elusive experience of the film that asks viewers to unveil its secrets. Excorio utilizes the influential nature of films to fester a feeling of unease in a superstitious audience, raising the possibility that the artifacts are haunted.

Theater curses long predate the medium of film. One of the most notorious examples being Shakespeare’s Macbeth, whose haunted lore impacts productions centuries later. The play was published in 1606 to indulge King James I of England, who had a well-known obsession with witchcraft and the occult. James wrote Daemonologie in 1597, a dissertation of his personal beliefs on necromancy and black magic. These writings further stimulated the persecution against witches, which was already prevalent in England and Scotland during the sixteenth century. Shakespeare used these writings as a main source for the Weird Sisters, the witches who steer Macbeth towards his eventual demise. The basis for Macbeth’s curse is the belief that the dialogue contains real incantations, along with references to the trial and execution of Dr. Fian, Agnis Sampson, and the North Berwick witches. Accounts of their demise were originally published in the pamphlet Newes From Scotland declaring the damnable life and death of Doctor Fian, a notable Sorcerer in 1591. ‘The story details the return of King James I and his bride from Denmark, who encountered a terrible storm which nearly capsized their ship. The pamphlet recounts Agnis Sampson’s confession to placing a curse on the king: She and the other witches took a cat, christened it, and bound portions of a dead man’s body to it. Later they threw this cat into the sea, and this was supposedly the reason why James encountered a storm on his trip home.’ In Newes from Scotland, she also admits that she ...tooke a blacke Toade, and did hang the same up by the heeles, three daies, and collected and gathered the venóme as it dropped and fell from it in an Oister shell...’ The ingredients of the witches’ brew in Macbeth include, among other items listed in Daemonologie, “Toad, that under cold stone days and nights has thirty-one swelt’red venom sleeping got.” Macbeth references the witches’ control over sea and wind multiple times,

2 Ibid. 185.
3 Ibid. 186.
Above
Ken Wynne, Joan MacArthur and Edward Altenza as the three witches in Macbeth (1952), directed by John Gielgud.
such as their ability to “...untie the winds and let them fight against the churches” or make “...the yesty waves confound and swallow navigation up.” Shakespeare even chooses a cat and toad as the witches’ familiars. Another influence on the Macbeth lore is Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, which was published in 1592. The plot follows scholar Doctor Faustus, who trades his soul to Lucifer for twenty-four years of service from devil Mephastophilis. The devil in turn grants him magical abilities and supernatural knowledge until his time is up and he is dragged to hell. After anti-theatricalist William Prynne attended a performance of Doctor Faustus, he proclaimed “the visible apparition of the Devil (was conjured) on the stage,” causing the audience to lose their sanity.

Macbeth’s influence over audiences is like what Prynne suggested of Faustus, but the former is supported by a real history of violence. The first performance of Macbeth saw the sudden death of Lady Macbeth’s actor and an accident involving the use of real daggers instead of props, resulting in the death of King Duncan’s actor. In 1849 a riot broke out in New York over a rivalry between actors, both of whom were playing Macbeth in opposing productions. The uproar left twenty dead and over one-hundred injured. Centuries later, the word Macbeth is avoided in the theater, rumored to bring bad luck if spoken. This curse, as with all cursed media, has adorned Macbeth with perversely surplus value, or what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as the over-valuation of images which contributes to their vitality, as if they are living entities. The heightened status increases their relevance and allows them to self-reproduce. This phenomenon occurs through audience participation, both feeding into and being fed by an image’s influence.

Cinema has a mystifying power over individuals and an ability to influence their actions. The earliest form of moving picture is optical animation toys, with the first successful animation device being the phenakistoscope. Invented in 1841, the name “phenakistoscope” is constructed from Greek roots meaning ‘to cheat or trick’ and ‘to look.’ It is a disc with illustrations along the border and slots. The user would face the disc towards a mirror, spin it, and, looking through the slots, the images would animate. Due to its illusionary qualities, the toy was marketed as “The Magic Wheel.” When the kinetoscope premiered thirty years later, it utilized the same phenomenon of cycling images. Upon seeing a kinetoscope demonstration in Paris in 1894, the Lumière Brothers developed a hybrid of motion picture camera, printer and projector. Their invention, the cinématographe, was released following year. This device, unlike previous moving picture devices, allowed the Lumières to project their films to live audiences. They primarily made actualités: short films documenting the world around them. Their fifty-second-long film Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat (prod. Société A. Lumière et ses Fils) featured the locomotive pulling into the frame towards the camera and subsequently causing audience members to leap from their seats out of fear of being hit. Despite the film “flickering black and white (not in natural colors and natural dimensions), and...the monotonous clatter of the projector’s sprockets engaging into the film’s perforation, the spectators felt physically threatened and panicked.” While this reaction stems from the audience’s unfamiliarity with the new medium, it is apparent that familiarity does not vanquish films’ physical influence.

---

8 “Arrivée D’un Train (à La Ciotat) (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat).” MoMA Learning.
Certain films that are eradicated from public viewing survive as ghosts. *Häxan* (dir. Benjamin Christensen, prod. AB Svensk Filminindustri) explores the history of witch hunting and occult in Western culture, presenting information as a “cultural history lecture in moving pictures.” Released in 1922, Danish filmmaker Benjamin Christensen positions persecution of witches as a misunderstanding of mental illness. His research is presented through historical documents and exaggerated reenactments, elevating both approaches to “the same level of cinematic depiction, fact and fiction, objective reality and hallucination.” With its risqué subject matter and litany of scenes depicting torture, sex, and nudity the film received harsh censorship in several countries including France, Germany, and the United States. For over a hundred years *Häxan* lived in “purgatory,” spoken of yet rarely seen. Fabien Delage takes advantage of this lost film phenomenon in *Fury of the Demon* (prod. Hippocampe Productions), depicting the lasting spectral power of Georges Méliès films. Stage magician Méliès generated hundreds of films in late nineteenth century and is credited as the creator of the first horror film, 1896’s *The House of the Devil* (prod. Star Film Company). Amidst war, financial troubles, and family crisis, Méliès burned many of his films’ negatives, sets and costumes. Unlike *Häxan* many of Méliès’ works are forever lost, but because of their heightened status these ghost films, or the narrative of them, can be resurrected for audiences decades later. *Fury of the Demon* is situated in the absence of Méliès’ films and utilizes the paradigm of haunted cinema. Released in 2016 under the guise of a documentary, *Fury of the Demon* refers to a lost film of Georges Méliès of the same name. According to legend, the film was screened only a handful of times because each showing drove audiences into a violent rage. Delage merges truth and conspiracy theory by first earning the audiences trust: his suggestion “that film and magic is the stuff of dreams and the unknowable mysteries of the universe,” is grounded by interviews which include film scholars, critics, filmmakers, and Méliès’ great-great granddaughter. Delage uses these interviews to dabble in some classic witchcraft scientific-lore, with one off-the-wall scholar suggesting ergot or mould in the cellulite print being scattered into the auditorium each time the film runs through the sprockets and arc lamps of the projector causing a kind of biological or chemical psychosis.

In this case, the lore surrounding Méliès’ film is the reason for its disappearance and the reason for its vitality.

Films are often adorned with a curse in conjunction with tragedy, making its surplus value fetishistic in nature. When subject matter is supernatural, as it often is with horror, it is simple to explain the gruesome actions of people, on and off set, as ghostly intervention. An infamous instance of this is *Rosemary’s Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, prod. Paramount Pictures, William Castle Productions), associated with violent tragedies. Released in 1968, the film follows a young

---

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Patrick Cooper, “‘Fury of the Demon’: Film History Meets Occult Conspiracy Theory,” Bloody Disgusting, August 01, 2016.
woman portrayed by Mia Farrow who, without her knowledge or consent, is impregnated with a demonic offspring. Her fate is determined by her actor husband Guy Woodhouse who trades her wellbeing for fame and success. *Rosemary’s Baby* is a film about a satanic cult released when cultural fear of the occult was on the rise, and condemnation from religious groups as “blasphemous.” Quite a few deaths and injuries are associated with the film, the first being composer Krzysztof Komeda who fell off a cliff at a party a few months after the film’s theatrical release. He was put into a coma and never regained consciousness, dying a year later. Coincidentally, this is the same way Rosemary’s only friend is killed in the novel. In April of 1969, the film’s producer William Castle was hospitalized with kidney stones and hallucinated scenes from the movie, reportedly yelling, “Rosemary, for God’s sake, drop the knife!” In July of the same year, director Roman Polanski noted having a gruesome premonition about his wife, actress Sharon Tate. She was murdered a month later by the Manson Family.

---

17 Ibid.
while *Rosemary’s Baby* still lingered in theaters. Morbid comparisons to *Rosemary’s* husband have been made, that “like Guy Woodhouse, Polanski made his young wife a blood sacrifice for his still-untouchable status in Hollywood and beyond.” Some conspiracy theories further tie the film in with the Manson Murders, pointing out strange coincidences:

The Manson murders were a mere moment in a grand Satanic conspiracy scored by the Beatles. *The White Album* was written largely at an Indian meditation (with Mia Farrow in attendance). The song title “Helter Skelter,” albeit misspelled, was scrawled in blood at the crime scene. And, a dozen years later, Lennon was assassinated across the street from the Dakota—the gabled landmark where *Rosemary’s Baby* was filmed.19

*The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, prod. Warner Bros. Pictures), much like *Rosemary’s Baby*, is notorious for conflating tragedy with the supernatural. Debuted in 1973, the film follows Reagan, portrayed by Linda Blair, the daughter of an actress who becomes possessed by a violent, filthy-tonged demon. The film caused audience members to become ill at showings, to which theaters responded by handing out barf bags (a purposeful marketing move). At one showing, a woman broke her jaw after fainting and sued Warner Bros., claiming that the subliminal messaging caused her injury. Fittingly, lightning reportedly struck a four-hundred-year-old cross atop a church at the film’s premiere in Rome. In addition to visceral reactions in theaters, the cast and crew experienced a string of bad luck. Most notably, an unexplained fire destroyed most of the set except the bedroom, where the possession scenes took place. Quite a few deaths are related to *The Exorcist*: before the film’s release, the set’s night watchman died, as did special effects expert. A background actor murdered a reporter but never provided a motive. Vasiliki Maliaros, who plays the mother of Father Karras, died before the film’s release and Jack McGowran, director Burke

---

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Dennings in the film, died just a week after the film’s release. Coincidentally, both characters die in the film. 21 When legend builds around a horror film, professional abuse can be incorporated into a film’s lore or justified as a means to get the desired performance out of an actor. Unfortunately, thirteen-year-old Linda Blair’s experience is often excused as the latter: Infamously, Blair was often strapped into a harness during exorcism scenes. In these sequences, Regan would be violently thrashing and jerking about, and all the while, the harness would repeatedly hit Blair on the spine. A less extreme example of what Linda Blair had to endure during production was the extensive application of makeup. Each day, Blair would have to undergo at least two hours in the makeup chair, with sessions sometimes lasting for as long as five hours. The application process was grueling, and during an interview with Studio 10, Blair explained that the glue used to hold the prosthetics together actually burned her face. 22

For Rosemary’s Baby, Polanski made vegetarian Mia Farrow eat raw liver and walk into oncoming New York traffic, telling her “nobody will hit a pregnant woman” (referring to her character’s pregnancy). 23 By explaining these actions as part of the filmmaking process or integrating them into the film’s lore, the audience becomes complicit in the abuse. But horror has never been subtle about violence against women, in fact it’s a recurring subject matter. In both films, but especially in The Exorcist, the female leads are painted as both victim and monster (or the vessel for the monster). Linda Blair’s Reagan is made so perverted and abject that the line between abused child and monster are blurred. She spends so much screen time as the demon that her experiences of abuse are silenced, and the violence against the demonic her is justified.

Cursed films offer audiences a perverse method for dealing with real life tragedies, intertwining fake horror with real horror. This narrative extends the influential power and longevity of a film by heightening its cultural status. Ira Levin, author of the original novel Rosemary’s Baby, has noted that his work intensified anxieties about the occult, and he “feel(s) a certain degree of guilt about having fostered that kind of irrationality.” 24 This is a fetishistic form of surplus value, which W.J.T. Mitchell describes as being “associated with greed, acquisitiveness, perverse desire, material-ism, and a magical attitude toward objects.” 25 Cursed films exemplify this idea: the superstition associated with these films hypnotize audiences; they flock to theaters not despite the warnings of bad luck and barf bags, but because of it. Film is seen and shared communally, allowing for rumors and superstition to spread. The public is “taken in by an illusion that we project into things, or (even worse) perversely and cynically perpetrating that illusion on others.” 26

A film’s props and supplemental materials can act as a catalyst for horror; they are vessels for real horrific experiences that are shared by an actor and an audience. Steven Spielberg’s Poltergeist (prod. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Amblin Entertainment) is a particularly morbid example, in which the props in question are real human skeletons instead of plastic ones. JoBeth Williams, who filmed the scene in a pool overrun by the skeletons was unaware:

In my naivete, I assumed these were not real skeletons, I assumed that they were prop skeletons, you know, made out of plastic or rubber or something. But the skeletons were not synthetic. I found out from the crew that they were using real skeletons, because it’s far too expensive to make skeletons out of rubber. 27

---

Poltergeist has built a reputation as a cursed film in part from this abhorrent piece of trivia, but also due to the deaths of four cast members during and shortly after filming of the trilogy. This grotesque sequence transcended fictional body horror and became a visceral reality for Williams. Ted Raimi also had a grotesque prop experience filming Evil Dead II (dir. Sam Raimi, prod. Renaissance Pictures). The prosthetics for his character, the demonic form of Henrietta, required full-body prosthetics that caused him to become extremely overheated, to the point that his costume was literally filled with liters of sweat; Special effects artist Gregory Nicotero describes pouring the fluid into several Dixie cups so as to get it out of the costume. The sweat is also visible on-screen, dripping out of the costume’s ear, in the scene where Henrietta spins around over Annie’s head.

In both instances, actors experienced genuine body horror while filming fictional body horror.

Like Mitchell’s fetish object, Excorio’s artifacts are “made thing(s) with a spirit or demon in it.” To uncover the full narrative, the audience must toy with objects they believe to be haunted or cursed. Similarly, found footage horror film The Blair Witch Project

(31 Emalie Marthe, “‘They Wished I Was Dead’: How ‘The Blair Witch Project’ Still Haunts Its Cast,” VICE, September 14, 2016.)
Left
JoBeth Williams filming with real skeletons for 1982’s Poltergeist.

Right
Ted Raimi as Henrietta for 1987’s Evil Dead II.
simply one of many artifacts offered to support the information given on the website, and not vice versa.31 The marketing allowed for an element of play, in which “audiences enjoyed the novelty because they were not commonly asked to seek essential information beyond the film text itself.” Some of the viewers ...enter into the game... with a kind of double consciousness: They keep themselves deliberately ignorant of the fictional status of the film, with a view to a higher enjoyment of the ambiguities, yet knowing full well on a metalevel that keeping themselves ignorant is necessary only because they already know that the film is fiction.

Even those for whom the issues of authenticity were no longer relevant, they still partook in a “game about participating in the production of horror.”32 The working methodology of Excorio is like that of Häxan’s creator, Christensen, who described his film as “a series of episodes that—as part of a mosaic—give expression to an idea.”33 Excorio uses the visual language of late 1970’s horror films to place the viewer in a realm where they believe project is real (enough), so they engage in play. The film’s imagery utilizes oversaturated colors and intense lighting to establish strangeness and unreality, like Dario Argento’s Suspiria (prod. Seda Spettacoli). Released in 1977, Suspiria was the last film to be processed in three-strip Technicolor. This process had become arcane by the late 1970’s, but Argento “persuaded the Technicolor processors in Rome to hold on to a single machine until he finished Suspiria.”34 The horror film is embellished with fairy tale visuals, “like cut-out cartoons.”35 Excorio’s images are composed cinematically, utilizing figures in different fields to create depth and space. The strange campiness of Excorio, evident in the squirrel illustration, is similar in tone to Hausu’s (dir. Nobuhiko Obayashi, prod. Toho) demon cat or flesh-eating piano. Nearly every drawing includes a figure or portrait, either of the costumed monsters or of the two main characters, Sylvie and Maureen. The design of the monster costume combines a few visuals, including the body of Italian Schnappviecher costumes from the Egetmann pageants in Tramin, whose name is composed of the German words “snap” and “cattle.” They are described as

...a sort of crocodile without ears but with horns, and covered in skins. His lower jaw opens and closes with a loud noise, always on the lookout for prey. This crocodile-like creature is two metres tall, and there is usually a whole group of them. They are always followed by the butcher who, at each of the stops at the many fountains captures one of them and kills it, another ritual of spring banishing the bad spirits of winter.36

These figures inspired the core theme of the story: being chased. Other costumes draw from the faces of Victorian puppets and the colors, giant heads, and exaggerated features of Paolo Puck. The focus on body horror and peeling skin is taken from films such as Evil Dead II and John Carpenter’s The Thing (prod. Universal Pictures, Turman-Foster Company). Settings are atmospheric, depicting only one or two items to describe the space, such as a bed or a gate. There is a constant play between highly rendered areas and flat colors. The color scheme consists of dark blues and black, with warm colors being saturated reds, oranges and pinks, and cool colors being dark and olive greens. Green signifies supernatural evil in films like Rosemary’s Baby and The Exorcist. Illustrations of blood are always dripping, gooey, and bright red.

The word suspiria is Latin for “breathlessness.”

34 Fujiwara. “Häxan: The Real Unreal.”
referring to the film’s Mater Suspiriorum, or Mother of Sighs. The word encapsulates the shortness of breath after a physical activity, or the feeling one is left with after witnessing an awe-inspiring event. This is fitting for a film about a dance school run by a coven of witches. Similarly, Excorio is not immediately understood by English speaking audiences: the title means “to peel, flay, or scalp” in Latin. Sylvie and Maureen first encounter the nightmarish, costumed villain when it gifts them a costume made of skin. It then attempts to force its way from the women’s dreams into their waking world, imitating animals and people by wearing their skins. Like the project itself, the costumed monster is an empty vessel, a hollow skin with nothing underneath.

Like Suspiria, multiple typographic versions of the Excorio title are used. They are all loosely drawn, thick letters with jagged, uneven edges, and a paper texture. The words are often placed on a curve or wave instead of a straight line. In one version, the recurring image of the peeled orange is place inside of the “o.”

Existing imagery or text has been applied to the illustrations to further place them within the period. For example, the Fangoria magazine cover is taken from issue #7, 1979, and the big-headed Sylvie image has replaced The Shining’s Jack Nicholson from the original cover. The VHS box has been adorned with age 18 restriction stickers, a barcode that pulls up the film’s title when scanned, the VHS logo, and the logo of fake production company Maenad Pictures. All the objects are distressed to show their age.

Target audiences for Excorio are adults who enjoy the genres of horror and supernatural thrillers, movie ephemera, and aesthetics of late 1970’s and early 1980’s horror films. It fosters superstition, drawing in viewers who think twice about interacting with an artifact they believe to hold a spirit or curse. The fictional meta narrative is told through a catalog, complete with images and interviews with the surviving cast. What is revealed of Excorio’s lore draws from the supposed supernatural affairs of movies like Rosemary’s Baby and The Exorcist. The future of Excorio involves a website and social media presence for this urban legend to grow and new “artifacts” to be found. The project is an interactive ghost story that tells elements of a story without revealing its entirety, fits within a particular time and genre, and places importance on a film’s supplemental materials. Excorio entices the viewer to play with the supernatural to unveil the truth.
FANGORIA

SPECIAL SUMMER PREVIEWS

MONSTERS • ALIENS • BIZARRE CREATURES

THE TERROR FACTOR

SAVINI strikes back — MANIAC!

Alien creatures of GALAXINA

The HAUNTING Artwork of...

EXCORIO
Left
Excorio illustration for Fangoria #7, 1979. In reality, this issue was the first of any US magazine to focus entirely on horror. It was the first issue of Fangoria to achieve a profit.

Above
Film poster for Excorio. Featured in a backlit frame for gallery showing in May 2021.
Right
VHS Box design for Excorio.

Next Page
Imagery from the Jacob’s Ladder toy created for Excorio.
A somnambulist horror unlike anything you have ever seen. The enchanting, phantasmal visuals of *Excorio* will keep your eyes glued to the screen, even when your senses tell you to look away.

Dreams turn to nightmares as stage hypnotist Sylvie (Almee Rivette) and seamstress Maureen (Michelle Harper) traverse the carnival of their fantasy. Their fun sours when they are given a costume, coming to find its the shedded skin of a creature. The women will face assailants dressed as hungry dogs, submit to their sudden cravings for rotting fruit skins, and gauge who they can trust, as allies are revealed to be costumed imitations. Worst of all, the gruesome puppeteer will push his way into our world, one skin costume at a time.

**If you see **Excorio** in your dreams tonight, you may be next...**
Left
Aimee Rivette as Sylvie for Excorio makeup test.

Right
Fake photograph from Excorio depicting the film’s monster as a nine foot prop called “Cavi” and costume designer Martine Noël.

Next Page
Imagery from the Thaumatrope toy created for Excorio.
Bibliography