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Exclusive Interviews, Reviews, Essays, and Miscellanea from Sean Malin

“The Devil and Father Amorth”: The Architectural Genius of William Friedkin’s Nonfiction

April 16, 2018 · by Sean L. Malin · in Awards, Documentary, Film, Filmmakers, Foreign Language, Horror, Reviews. ·
Directed by: William Friedkin
Written by: William Friedkin, Mark Kermode
Produced by: Mickey Liddell, Pete Shilaimon
Edited by: Gary Leva
Featuring the Music of: Christopher Rouse
Photography by: William Friedkin, Robert Yeoman, George Giaimo

Courtesy The Orchard

"There's a demon in my belly
And a gremlin in my brain
There's someone up the chimney hole
And Satan is his name"
-Spinal Tap

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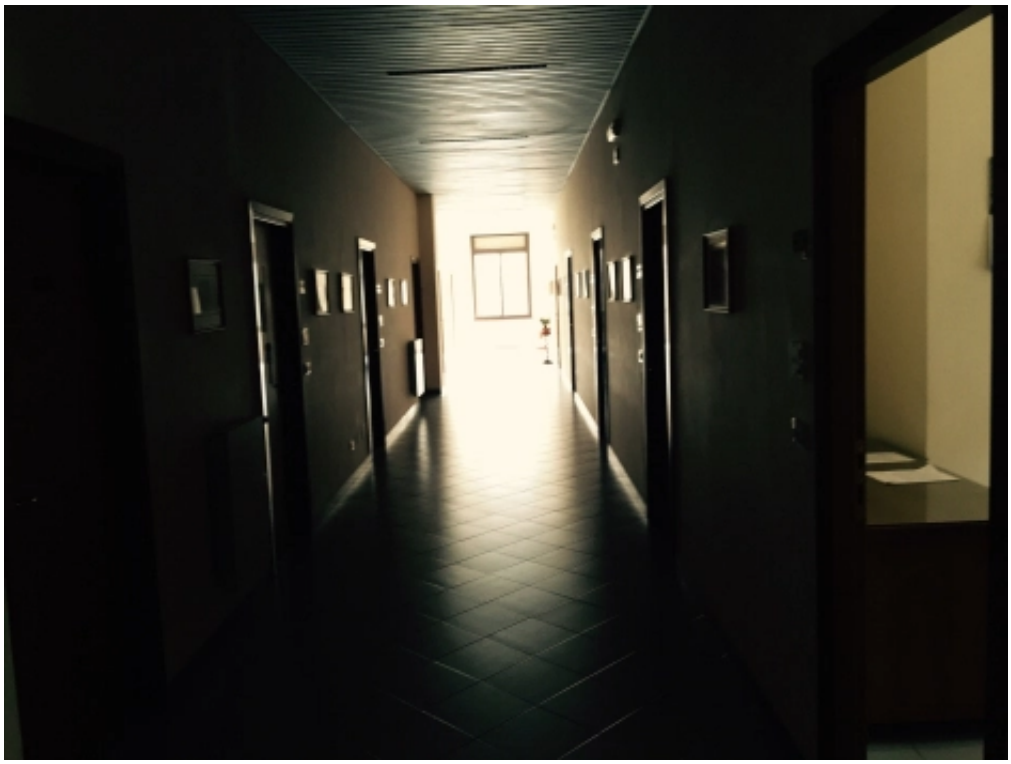
In ***The Devil and Father Amorth (http://thedevilandfatheramorth.film/)***, William Friedkin returns to the form from which his expansive career blossomed: nonfiction filmmaking.

It is a welcome callback for this director, whose legendarily assured touch in fiction is just as often saturated with exploitation, pulp, and a taste for images of violent extremity. Those fascinations continue to inform even this project, a real-world exploration of the psychology of Satanic exorcisms, but his curiosity here is restrained (to our benefit) by his role as the film's narrator and guiding presence.

As director, co-writer (with Mark Kermode), cameraman, and star, Friedkin is more present onscreen than he has been since *Fritz Lang Interviewed by William Friedkin* in 1975. Gone are the pea-soup vomit and the abused crucifixes of that era's Friedkin; leftover from that period, however, is the narrative intellect that brought them to the cinema.



Courtesy William Friedkin/The Orchard

As Friedkin tells it, the forty-three years since ***The Exorcist*** have done nothing to dull his interest in supernatural phenomena and their relationship to the Catholicism of his youth. At some point, he learned that exorcism was indeed a real, painful aspect of modern life, and began pursuing relationships with those who conduct them.

That led him to **The Reverend Gabriele Amorth (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/09/20/father-gabriele-amorth-exorcist--obituary/)**, an Italian priest so expert at freeing people from Satanic spirits that he was known (incorrectly, it seems) as the Vatican's chief exorcist.

What's more, Amorth adored Friedkin's movie. Their relationship quickly became one of trust; and after some prodding, Amorth eventually consented to let Friedkin film an exorcism, provided he came alone and brought only a small handheld camera.

From this agreement emerged a sequence of raw terror around which Friedkin and editor **Gary Leva** built the film.

In the meantime, the filmmaker revisits Georgetown, providing *Exorcist* fans with a pinch of behind-the-scenes nostalgia, and reconnects with the writer of the film, **William Peter Blatty** (their conversations span from 2010 to Blatty's passing last year.)

The climax – in which Amorth attempts to compel a demonic presence out of a young woman's body, in Rome – is among the most frightening material ever put onscreen, much less in a fiction film. Leva sculpts the footage into the molten core of this slim documentary with incredible litheness and surreal intensity. Not only would it be inappropriate to describe what, exactly, we see in it, but it may also be impossible.

Courtesy William Friedkin/The Orchard

To test that logic, Friedkin conducts a series of follow-up interviews with academic luminaries and religious talking heads, who he shows his findings. One by one, they theorize about what the footage shows, only to come to the mutual conclusion that Amorth's work is unexplainable in modern scientific or religious terms.

I imagine this must be most dissatisfying to Friedkin, whose pursuit of the radical truth of demonic possession is more puzzling than conclusive. Viewers will respond to the fundamental question – are exorcisms, or rather the Mephistophelian villains who warrant them, real? – as something of a Rohrschach test. Believers will believe ever stronger, while skeptics may smell the brine of hogwash.

Only to cinephiles will none of this matter: here is an entertainment of impeccable structural caliber, entrancing from the first and unrelentingly thrilling.

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My relationship to *The Exorcist* is an unchangeably personal one, and a fundamental factor in the impact of this new work on me. While perhaps not the first film I ever saw, it may well have been the first horror movie I was allowed to watch – which I did with my parents, on television at the age of 4.

To say that it scared me then is to understate one of my life's first traumas: experiencing primal fear at the demonic disrealities of Friedkin's cinema.

Almost thirty years later, remnants of its imagery – the stairs, the spider-walk, the twisting head – continue to present themselves in my nightmares, more real in my imagination than in actual reality. Watching it now, grown but no less easy to scare, is still painful; yet now, as then, my eyes never leave the screen when I see the film on television.

Courtesy William Friedkin/The Orchard

That Friedkin was able and allowed to execute such brilliant (and damaging) material even once in his life is a minor miracle. How many living artists can claim to have changed the lives of millions around the world with their work, for better or worse? Even without ***The Boys in the Band***, ***The French Connection***, and ***Sorcerer***, his impact on American film culture is behemoth.

Now try to imagine my shock, and my fear, at the terrifying excellence of *The Devil and Father Amorth*. It has been more than five years since Friedkin's last project, ***Killer Joe***, brought chicken-fried Gothic flavor to an unsatisfying faux-noir script, and Friedkin is no longer a young man. That he would make another film at all is something of a gift. That he would make his best work in over a decade was inconceivable.

The Orchard is distributing this documentary, smartly, in limited release. This is the appropriate strategy: buried beneath the surface here is the same root that took hold in viewer's minds in 1973, driving *The Exorcist* to blockbuster success; in 1999, when ***The Blair Witch Project*** became one of the most profitable works of entertainment ever made; and in 2009, when ***Paranormal Activity*** quietly emerged as the horror film of my lifetime.

Our curiosity, like Friedkin's, overtakes us. What in this world cannot be explained by neuroscience, physics, or the human eye? With so much talk of demons, angels, ghosts, goblins, and Gods, what are we to believe?

The Orchard presents The Devil and Father Amorth, an LD Entertainment Production, in theaters April 20, 2018, and on DVD and VOD April 24.

Editor’s Note: Journalism is hard and criticism often equally so, but we continue unabated our half-decade enterprise of highlighting undervocalized and underexposed voices in cinema, music, comedy, and culture. Help us continue to provide subscribers with exclusive conversations with up-and-coming filmmakers, Oscar-nominees, and legendary comics by making a tax-deductible donation to CineMalin today. (https://cmfilmcommentary.com/donations/)

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