



(https://tltbreaker.mui.media/pipeline/65666270/cj/v12835DEABJ-

573J8100L50936123745321583858L509389QEL5148382QPOGOGQ1A91675A00001000G0GFC30E30V6483582a2DW4502cDW441752DW482052DX12a0a94a84e2G0G020)

# Feb 4 FILM / Finding the Sacred Among the Profane: The Church / Sean Woodard

Film (2017) posts/category/film)

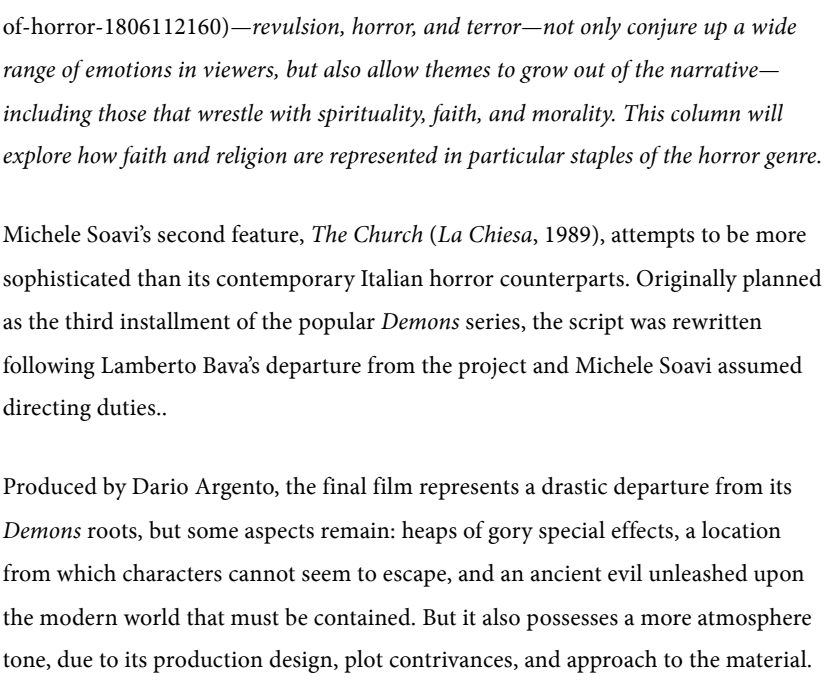


Image © Cecchi Gori Distribution

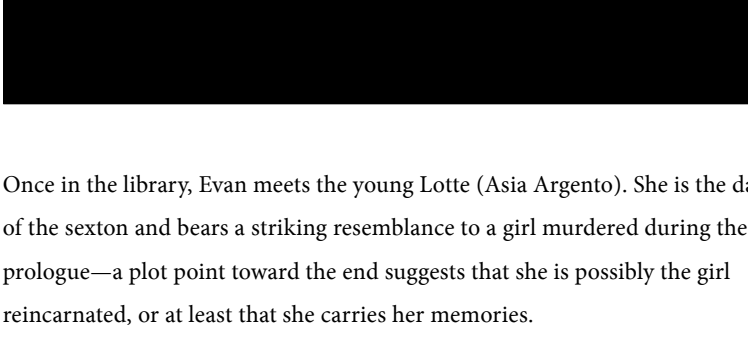
Horror represents the ripest genre to provide commentary on contemporary issues. Not only do horror films appeal to our basest emotions, they are the most malleable in terms of form and content. Stephen King writes in *Dance Macabre* that the <https://www.foxhubb.com/stephen-king-breaks-down-the-different-levels-of-horror-106612160/>—revulsion, horror, and terror—*not only conjure up a wide range of emotions in viewers, but also allow themes to grow out of the narrative—including those that wrestle with spirituality, faith, and morality.* This column will explore how faith and religion are represented in particular staples of the horror genre.

Michèle Soavi's second feature, *The Church* (*La Chiesa*, 1989), attempts to be more sophisticated than its contemporary Italian horror counterparts. Originally planned as the third installment of the popular *Devono* series, the script was rewritten following Lamberto Barbi's departure from the project and Michèle Soavi assumed directing duties.

Produced by Dario Argento, the final film represents a drastic departure from its *Demons* roots, but some aspects remain: heaps of gory special effects, a location from which characters cannot seem to escape, and an ancient evil unleashed upon the modern world that must be contained. But it also possesses a more atmospheric tone, due to its production design, plot contrivances, and approach to the material. By mixing religious and demonic imagery with the noetic theories of Fulcanelli (which allude to an alchemical connection to the building of gothic cathedrals) to achieve this atmosphere, Soavi raises this convoluted, somewhat nonsensical horror film into a visually arresting cult classic.

In some ways, the manifestation of evil in *The Church* almost parallels that of John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness* (1987). While it is uncertain whether the writers were aware of Carpenter's film, the plots are oddly similar. In *Prince of Darkness*, Satan is incarnate in the form of a green liquid trapped within a sealed container located in a church. The Catholic Church attempts to keep this discovery a secret and calls in scientific experts for their expertise. Eventually, the slime breaks free from its confines and infects those it touches, turning them into zombie-like minions of Hell. In Soavi's film, the Catholic Church harbors knowledge of a secret evil buried underneath a church. When unleashed, it makes people see illusions and then ultimately possess their bodies. Survivors must then find a way to prevent the evil from reaching the outside world.

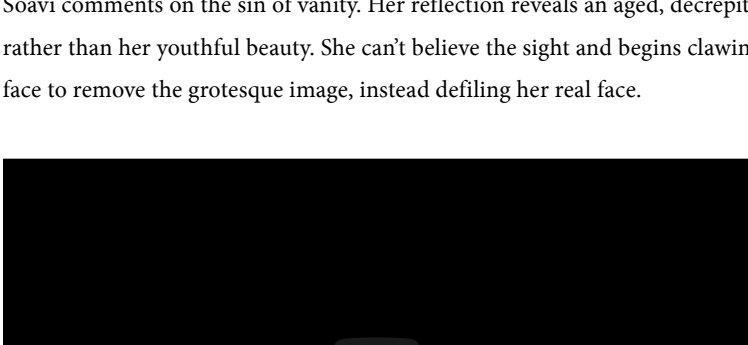
*The Church* opens with a prologue that follows a group of Teutonic Knights during the Crusades era. They slaughter a group of people believed to be devil worshippers. As in *Witchfinder's General*, the knights are tipped off by a supposed sign of a pact between the devil and their human servants; in this case, the sign of the cross cut into a girl's foot. The man who leads the knights to the hiding place of these people says that with each step the girl blasphemes by trampling on the holy symbol. Following the massacre of the , the bodies are thrown into a mass grave and a church is erected upon the site in order to contain the alleged evil.



While the scene references Sergei Eisenstein's portrayal of the knights in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), certain camera shots bring to mind how the historic church has enacted atrocities in the name of religion. A POV shot of a knight as he rides is seen through the cross-shaped grill of his helmet. In addition, the knights were historically a brotherhood of monks tasked with protecting Christianity from their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They were also fierce mercenary combatants against foes of Christianity. Their ruthlessness and imagery in also inspired Hitler regarding the SS; much propaganda before and during WWII included portrayals of the Teutonic Knights. Returning to the film, the mass grave the knights dispose of the dead bodies recall those dug to bury plague victims.

The film then cuts to the late 1980s. We follow a scholar named Evan (Tomás Arana), the new librarian of the gothic cathedral. On his first day he meets Lisa (Barbara Capini), who is restoring the cathedral. She is in the process of touching up a fresco when she accidentally knocks her supplies off the scaffolding she is standing on. They fall onto Evan below. The two then flirt briefly before Evan is whisked away to the cathedral library. The Bishop (Fredero Chaplinan, Jr., *Almondusk*) expresses his contempt at the fact that Evan arrived a half hour late. (When Lisa and Evan meet again, he suggests she reads Fulcanelli's *The Mystery of the Cathedrals* to inform her restoration work.)

The specific fresco that we first see Lisa restoring displays a horrific scene: bodies on the throes of death, including one being eaten by a demon. This appears to reference Dante's *Inferno*, where Judas is shown being consumed by Satan. The fresco also mirrors numerous paintings that depict the Last Judgement, including one by Hieronymus Bosch, and hellish visions as portrayed in Louis Boulenger's "The Round of the Sabbath".

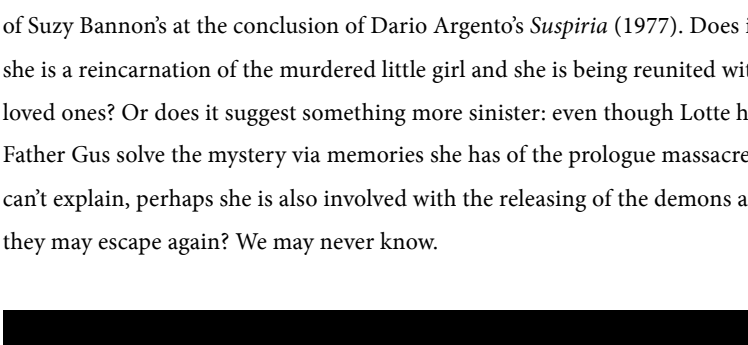


Once in the library, Evan meets the young Lotte (Asia Argento). She is the daughter of the sexton and bears a striking resemblance to a girl murdered during the prologue—a plot point toward the end suggests that she is possibly the girl reincarnated, or at least that she carries her memories.

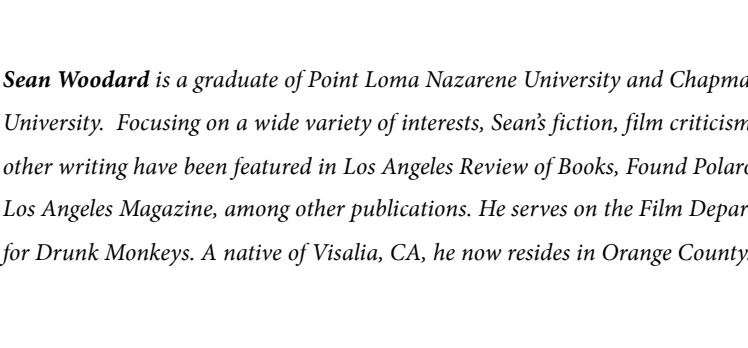
The plot unravels after this point, but to sum it all up, Evan is eager to discover the secrets behind an old piece of parchment he finds. It leads him to opens up a crypt under the cathedral and unknowingly unleashes demons. The next day, an unknown mechanism is triggered and the only exit to the church is sealed shut. Trapped inside are Lisa, group of school children and their chaperone, an old couple, a bride-to-be and her wedding photography posse, a reeling boyfriend and girlfriend, and all the priests. According to a manuscript, the bishop must then find another secret mechanism that'll supple the cathedral and prevent the demons from entering the outside world.

While the plot is the weakest aspect of the film, Soavi's delicious visuals more than compensate for the lack of narrative sense. According to Dario Argento and Michèle Soavi in interviews contained on the recent Scorpion Releasing Blu-Ray disc, the script and art design is directly influenced by Fulcanelli's *Mystery of the Cathedrals*—also, they do not detail in depth how they achieved this. However, to depict a sense of delirium, Soavi uses sweeping camerawork with soft imagery combined with editing effects to show how the characters begin seeing visions. Father Gus (Hugh Quarshie) begins seeing a Teutonic knight. Lotte hears the pounding of horse hooves following her, and the sexton is attacked by an animatronic fish-like demon that mutilates his face. Even one character drinks tainted Holy Water and begins hallucinating before she is fully possessed.

One iconic hallucinatory image toward the end of the film involving a nude woman being seduced by a demon recalls painter Boris Vallejo's "Vampire's Kiss." (NOTE: the below scene is NSFW)

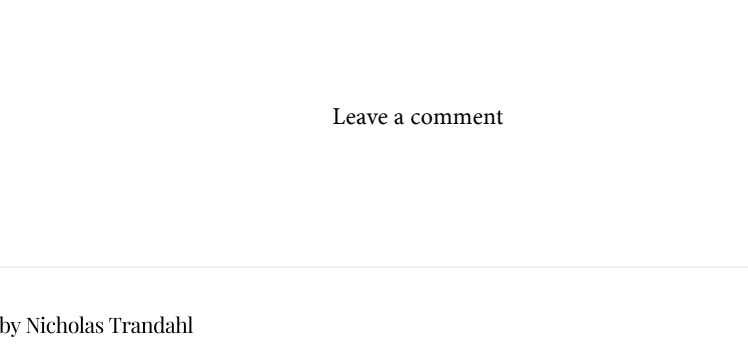


In a sequence that recalls Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the bride-to-be catches her reflection in a mirror. She says she cannot survive without a mirror. Here Soavi comments on the sin of vanity. Her reflection reveals an aged, decrepit face, rather than her youthful beauty. She can't believe the sight and begins clawing at her face to remove the grotesque image, instead defiling her real face.



The film also refers to the world as belonging to the Devil. This is seen in the bishop's homily following his recitation of the Gospel miracle of Jesus driving out devils, which address themselves as Legion, out of a man. In a later dinner scene, between the Cathedral's clergy, the bishop mentions a Latin quote he found that can benefit one of the priests' upcoming sermons. It translates, "The world is the Devil's," in that the world identifies itself with the Devil. The priest asks if the quote is too strong for churchgoers to stomach, to which the bishop replies, "No God, no Devil. The Devil is everywhere. Even when you put the flowers on the altar, the Devil is at your shoulder."

This quote seems to confirm the tonal conceit of the film, that evil may not be able to be defeated by mortal beings. As the bishop and Father Gus race bring down the cathedral, Lisa enters a hypnotic trance and finds herself beneath the cathedral. The other trapped people have become possessed and initiate a Satanic ritual, which involves a demonic figure mating with Lisa. This more literal rendering of the scene in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968) where Mia Farrow's character has sexual intercourse with Satan is horrifying. The demon is a winged, horned figure with a goat's face—a depiction that harkens back to historical wood carvings of Satan in between the 15th and 18th centuries. (NOTE: the below scene is NSFW)



Following this, a writhing mass of bodies (presumably those of the slain devil worshippers from the 12th Century prologue or even more demons) emerges from a fissure in the cathedral's floor.

Father Gus' attempt to understand what is going on accidentally leads to the death of the bishop, who falls to his death from a high steeple. Without the bishop as a guide, he must try to stop the evil alone before it is too late. In a film such as *The Church*, as well as Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*, the filmmakers seem to purport how the party responsible for keeping the demonic forces at bay or hidden from the outside world (the Catholic Church, in this case), possess a grave amount of culpability for what occurs on screen. Furthermore, its representatives must metaphorically confess a *mea culpa* for the church's historical atrocities and fallible faults and take responsibility to defend the present evil and right the institution's wrongs. (If only this were truly the case in real life.)

Even though Father Gus succeeds in bringing down the cathedral, Lotte, the only surviving character, rediscovers the opening to the crypt underneath the rubble. A blue light, which emanated when Evan first opened the crypt, bathes Lotte's face at the end. She smiles before the scene cuts to black. Her smile is as ambiguous as that of Sissy Hunsicker at the conclusion of Dario Argento's *Suspria* (1977). Does it mean she is a reincarnation of the murdered little girl and she is being reunited with her loved ones? Or does it suggest something more sinister: even though Lotte helps Father Gus solve the mystery via memories she has of the prologue massacre that she can't explain, perhaps she is also involved with the releasing of the demons and that they may escape again? We may never know.



**Sean Woodard** is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writing have been featured in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Found Polaroids*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves on the Film Department for *Drunk Monkeys*. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.

Sean Woodard (2017) posts/tag/Sean+Woodard), film (2017) posts/tag/film), Horror Movies (2017) posts/tag/Horror+Movies)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SHARBENBARERPHOTOS/HTTPS://WWW.DRUNKMONKEYS.US/2017/POSTS/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/>  
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SHARBENBARERPHOTOS/HTTPS://WWW.DRUNKMONKEYS.US/2017/POSTS/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/>  
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/SHARBENBARERPHOTOS/HTTPS://WWW.DRUNKMONKEYS.US/2017/POSTS/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/>  
Reddit: <https://www.reddit.com/user/SHARBENBARERPHOTOS/HTTPS://WWW.DRUNKMONKEYS.US/2017/POSTS/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/>  
Tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/user/SHARBENBARERPHOTOS/HTTPS://WWW.DRUNKMONKEYS.US/2017/POSTS/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/>



SEAN WOODARD (2017) POSTS? AUTHOR=5AF08BF39AF8CA52FC8EB53)

Sean Woodard serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* and is a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writing have been featured in *Los Angeles Review of Books* (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/contributors/sean-woodard/>), *South Broadway Ghost Society* (<https://sbgphotos.org/2021/07/16/dingle-bay-summer-2012-sean-woodard/>), *NonBinary Review*, *Cultural Valtures* (<https://culturecultures.com/author/sean-woodard/>), and *Los Angeles Magazine* (<https://www.lamag.com/author/sean-woodard/>), among other publications. You may follow him on Twitter @SeanWoodard7326 and at <https://www.seanwoodard.com/>. (<https://www.seanwoodard.com/>)  
Website (<https://www.seanwoodard.com/>)

Leave a comment



RED BOOK REVIEWS | Pulling Words by Nicholas Trindahl

(2017) posts/2017/9/27/25F42F1F/FINDING-THE-SACRED-AMONG-THE-PROFANE-THE-CHURCH-SEAN-WOODARD/

2022 Marginalia Publishing | all original content © the contributing writer

Drunk Monkeys logo designed by Severin Piehl and Allan Ferguson

Powered by Squarespace ([http://www.squarespace.com/channel=wood\\_of\\_moon&uschannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4611028ee0b2bc5c65db3](http://www.squarespace.com/channel=wood_of_moon&uschannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4611028ee0b2bc5c65db3))