

EVIL LOOKS RIGHT BACK AT YOU:
PORTRAYALS OF CATHOLICISM IN *AMERICAN HORROR STORY: ASYLUM*

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in

Film and Television Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2015

Approved by:



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Abstract

Religion has been a defining theme in the horror genre since the beginning of film as a medium. Horror stories with religious themes are almost always filtered through the lens of Catholicism, and as such, bring along with them a number of expectations and tropes set about the Catholic Church. One can expect to see Catholic iconography displayed in a domineering and symbolic way, with sacred icons used as physical conduits for religious power. Church clergy are often used as representations of Church suppression and the corruption and secrecy that is often suspected of the Catholic hierarchy. Throughout history, Catholicism has been used to convey a kind of occult expertise that is not present in other Christian denominations.

American Horror Story (2011-) is a pastiche of American horror tropes, using horror standards of decades past with an outrageous aesthetic derived from a mashup of different horror themes. The second season, *Asylum*, depicts a Catholic-run insane asylum in the 1960's. In this paper, I explore the use of Catholic horror themes within the show, first depictions of clergy, then the use of iconography and Church doctrine, finally relating its portrayal of the Church to the show's ultimate goal of social commentary.

Introduction

The horror genre occupies a strange and unique place in the public consciousness of the country. Over the decades it has consistently produced more polarizing and more extreme films and television than perhaps any other genre, and yet continues to attract audiences and survive at least as well as the most escapist, feel-good melodrama. The continued popularity of the horror genre in film and television raises the question of what exactly it is about horror that the human race enjoys seeing. Repeatedly we subject ourselves to the worst depictions of the world and human nature imaginable, paying to see a studio's manifestation of our worst nightmares. Whatever the reason for our preoccupation with horror, it is clear that within the genre, there are some objects of fear that are displayed over and over again, inspiring some to reevaluate the things we are invited to fear.

In 2011, Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story* started airing, a show that could understatedly be called a gamble. The structure of a serialized horror story was already a challenging premise to live up to: how could you possibly keep an audience's attention well enough to keep their weekly interest in a genre that seems to lend itself best to movies? Though horror TV had been done before, the structure has usually been episodic in nature, presenting a kind of monster-of-the-week storyline. This structure most closely copies how movies treat horror, presenting the audience with a buildup of tension that is released within the same hour. *American Horror Story*, however, presented a continuous story, formatted much the same way as a TV drama. Additionally, the show immediately proved itself to be, quite simply, really strange. The season presented us with a mashup of some of the most recognizable horror topics, all encompassed within the very recognizable theme of a haunted

house. The jumps in time, jarring editing, and lurid set design supported the almost chaotic writing of the show, wherein characters and storylines were brought up and apparently discarded, and the plot and dialogue could go from sincere to camp within minutes.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, the first season of *American Horror Story* was successful enough for the show to be renewed despite its strangeness and grotesquerie both in subject and presentation. The second season, subtitled *Asylum*, added an even stranger twist on the show, presenting much of the same cast in a completely different setting, playing different characters in a different time period. Deviating entirely from the theme of the first season, *Asylum* appropriately presented a new set of classic horror tropes. In *Asylum*, we are shown aliens, evil doctors, Nazism, demon children, insanity, possession, aliens, mutant cannibals, serial killers, and finally, Catholicism. Beginning in present-day and told essentially through one long flashback, *Asylum* tells the various stories of the inmates at Briarcliff Asylum, a Massachusetts mental hospital of the old and abusive variety, a building of insulated punishment and misplaced treatment by Sister Jude, a harsh and sadistic nun (Jessica Lange). Of the inmates unjustly incarcerated at Briarcliff, the main protagonists are journalist Lana Winters (Sarah Paulson), placed in Briarcliff for homosexuality, Kit Walker (Evan Peters), accused of being a serial killer of women when his wife is abducted by aliens, and Grace Bertrand (Lizzie Brocheré), accused of killing her family with an axe. As events at Briarcliff become more chaotic with the possession of one of the nuns (Lily Rabe) by the devil, and the hiring of Dr. Thredson (Zachary Quinto), who is the real serial killer Kit is accused of being, the handle that Sister Jude and her boss, Monsignor Timothy Howard (Joseph Fiennes) have on the asylum becomes

gradually less secure, ensuring a legacy of pain and disaster for anyone unlucky enough to stay there, which is played out in present-day scenes throughout the season.

Of the societal institutions common among humanity, none manages to be quite so personal and communal at the same time as religion, which seeks to comfort believers from the dangers they perceive. Additionally, none is as influential among such a wide variety of people, especially considering (and perhaps dependent on) the necessary inability of its assertions to be proven. Believers, by submitting themselves to a religious institution, put themselves in a naturally vulnerable place. Implicit in accepting the premise of a higher being and a human conduit for its will (the Church) is the acceptance of a force naturally opposed to that being, manifesting itself as sin. Since the beginning of human consciousness, religion has been integral in the structure of human relationships. At its most basic level, religion of all denominations is an easily understood and intensely incentivized manifesto of the rules of human behavior. Whether one believes or not, there is no denying the fact that religion represents the most common denominator of superstition that human beings are willing to subscribe to (for my purposes I am defining “superstition” as “a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event, or a practice based on such a belief” as it is in the Oxford Dictionary). As the code by which so many people operate their lives, it is no surprise that religion appears in the horror genre as frequently as it does. Some have even posited that one reason religion factors so strongly in horror is that religion is fear-based in its presentation of sin and punishment, and as such, most of the fears we intrinsically have as humans are religiously-oriented and reproduced (Cowan 22).

The use of religion as a frame for horror is well-documented, but the American horror movie does not seem to be content with portraying just any denomination of religion. Overwhelmingly, what film portrays as the religious representative in horror is not just Christianity, but specifically Catholicism. Portraying a Christian perspective makes sense within an American market, but in a primarily Protestant country, to present Catholicism as the diegetic religious truth seems counterintuitive. And yet, Catholicism and Catholic imagery have been part of the horror canon since the beginning of narratives in film. I argue that this is because Catholicism, perhaps more than any other religion, walks the line between the familiar and the “other,” and its age and graphic iconography, along with its strict moral teachings and traditions, can easily be spun as both foreboding and comforting depending on what any given narrative requires. The portrayal of Catholicism has been at turns reverential and derisive, but the religion has consistently been treated as the first Christian authority on the occult in horror movies.

Since *American Horror Story* tells the story of each season through familiar and even cliché horror topics, it does not come as a surprise to see Catholicism become a main focus of one of the seasons. It does, however, bring into question why we consider Catholic icons and doctrine to be a source of fear in the first place. Religious and specifically Catholic horror has historically been one of the most popular forms of the genre, appearing in various forms consistently, hundreds of years before film was invented. For example, a political cartoon by Thomas Nast published in 1875 depicts Catholics as a horde of crocodiles invading American shores to devour its children (Kennedy). Though it was a subset of Christianity, most Americans for a long time saw Catholicism as something foreign, an imported religion that had

its center of control in Rome, and could therefore not be considered American. The history of America's relationship with Catholicism was one of suspicion, marked by distrust in a religion that was not seen as native to the United States (as native as Christianity can be in the Americas). Already, the opportunity for horror to focus on Catholicism is there. As a subset of Christianity, Catholicism provides a recognizable and relatable doctrine even for a Protestant audience, who will presumably know the basics of the religion and, as assumed Christians, not be alienated by the spiritual assumptions adopted by the movie. Additionally, the American history of anti-Catholicism and suspicion of the stranger and more "foreign" parts of the denomination prove to be aesthetically useful in horror. With such a complicated hierarchy controlled by distant figureheads in another country entirely, Catholicism lends itself to being enigmatic, shrouded in mystery and complex avenues of communication among authority figures.

More important, perhaps, than even the structure of Catholicism is its aesthetic. Catholicism is almost certainly the most florid and aesthetically excessive Christian denomination. Compared with the Puritan clean edges and conservative iconography of American Protestant Christianity, Catholicism looks almost lurid, seeming to revel in the suffering of saints and the punishment of sinners at the same time as it coats its cathedrals in gold and incredible artwork. Such locations provide a good opportunity to show the drama in a character's acknowledgment of a spiritual world, as in when the evil ex-Nazi in *Asylum*, Dr. Arden, seeks Sister Jude's help concerning the demonic possession of his favorite nun, Sister Mary Eunice. The scene represents a rare moment of sympathy and sincerity for the doctor, and his moment of introspection almost seems to be facilitated by the cathedral itself. Notably,

this is the only time in *Asylum* that a cathedral is actually shown, not counting the asylum chapel.

From the opening credits, which change every season to fit the current theme, the importance of Catholic imagery (and the horror tropes they inspire) to the theme of the season is made clear. Between frenetically sped up shots of the various asylum patients are brief shots, sometimes no more than a few frames long, of clergy and Catholic iconography. A priest, presumably the monsignor, appears unmoving in various places, his face always shrouded, while a nun is shown molesting a patient on a gurney. All of this is intercut with several still shots of a gleaming white statue of the Virgin Mary, a staple symbol in the show, whose classically gentle face twists into a malicious smile in the final shot. All of these images speak to a particular perception of Catholicism in horror, especially “American” horror, as the title of the show has implicitly labelled it. The tropes of the secretive, overbearing, and judgmental priest and the repressed and secretly hypersexual nun are both displayed from the outset of the season, among other hints at the types of horror the show will display. Even before the season began, the overarching theme in the TV spots and promotion material for *Asylum* were Catholic-centric, setting the religious atmosphere of the season.

American Horror Story is not known for its subtlety. Its version of horror presents genre staples in a way that is almost steroidal in their exaggeration. The bizarre aesthetic did not go unnoticed by critics. Though the first season was basically well-received, it definitely had its detractors who did not necessarily see the point of such excess, calling it “over-the-top” (Sepinwall) and that it “collapses into camp” on more than one occasion (McNamara). The second season, however, lent the show more of a context. The recycled cast brought attention

to the already overblown artifice of the show rather than trying to hide it as most movies and TV do (the common understanding being that film is a sustained lie meant to convince you of its reality so you can “lose yourself in it”), and as its story began to focus on topics relevant to modern-day society the show started to seem more purposeful and less chaotic. At first, *Asylum*'s discussion of homosexuality, feminism, racism, and other social issues might seem out-of-place within such an absurd and non-cerebral aesthetic. However, that aesthetic is not an accident or solely meant for shock value. It is a modern commentary on the history of its genre, self-aware in its reference to the many filmmakers and artists who came before Ryan Murphy that presented without irony the horror tropes that we are all now familiar with. Constantly, *American Horror Story* reminds its audience that it only exists because of the films that preceded it.

Similar horror pastiches have been released over the past decade; movies like *The Cabin in the Woods* and more recently *The Babadook* and *It Follows* are representative of a shift in the attitude of horror, which is no longer just satisfied with making its audience jump or grossing them out. Instead, their main concern is with why we find such things scary in the first place, why the film industry seems insistent on specific formulas for how such things should be presented, and what it is we are really responding to when we call a movie “scary.” These are texts that deconstruct the horror genre by participating in it, calling attention to its absurdities and deeper social implications, but respectfully, without resorting to the clumsy parody style of the *Scary Movie* franchise. With more horror following this model with critical and commercial success, it seems that horror is in the process of reinventing itself; taking the history of its genre

and turning the expectations that have been built over the decades into its own form of criticism.

As a participant in this new form of horror, *American Horror Story: Asylum* has chosen a very specific setting and theme for its season. Its portrayal of Catholicism hearkens back to decades and even centuries of past Catholic-themed art, often derogatory, that was then incorporated into American culture. The season, then, is re-presenting Catholic horror tropes in a way that asks its viewers to consider the cultural importance of such portrayals. This is done in a few ways, which I will attempt to explore in categories over the course of this paper. First, I will discuss the portrayal of nuns and other clergy in the season. *Asylum* includes every stereotype one immediately thinks of in regards to nuns and priests, all of which can essentially be reduced to the sexual suppression and overzealous morality that is often suspected of Catholic clergy. Whether they are doing good or bad, the suspicion of nuns and priests is that behind the piousness and insistent modesty they're always hiding something. Second, I will focus on the use of Catholic iconography in the season. Catholicism is an aesthetically graphic and dramatic religion. Its art, the uniforms of its clergy, and the physicality of its rituals all feature heavily in *Asylum* as in the films that came before it. The use of iconography places *Asylum* in a specifically Catholic context and set of moral expectations of the characters, so I will analyze what the season's art direction in regards to Catholicism asks us to pay attention to and why. Finally, I will look at the relationship between the season's story and the historical suspicion of Catholicism itself as it has been portrayed in media over the decades. With sexual politics and mores being a main theme in the season, *Asylum* equates the moral expectations of the 60's with those of Catholicism. Both are portrayed as antiquated, ignorant, corrupt, and

suppressing, working against progress both scientific and social in the name of tradition.

However, the purpose of this portrayal is not just to express a suspicion about Catholicism or mid-century America. In fact, despite its outrageous portrayal of the corruption of organized religion, I would not call *Asylum* anti-Catholic. Rather, the season uses the stereotypes associated with both the era and the religion to explore the dangers of favoring ideology and doctrine over compassion. Though the series certainly uses Catholicism to make this point, the religion is portrayed primarily as a social construct, with all the human lapses of ethics and morality that come with such organizations. The danger of what such power can do to society is what the horror in *Asylum* is based upon.

Clergy and Catholic Horror

Central to society's preoccupation with Catholicism is the idea of repression. The labeling of indulgence in too many worldly sources of fun, particularly sexual activity, as "sin" has been a defining aspect of the way religion as a whole is perceived by the general public, and in artistic representations of this kind of repression, the most common and recognizable images have been Catholic. Once again, the Catholic aesthetic does nothing to discourage this view. The lurid, often punishment-themed religious artwork paired with the elaborate costuming associated with the traditional image of Catholic clergy manifest themselves in film as being indicative of and inseparable from their repression. In other words, in film, it is not enough for a priest or a nun to take religious vows; they must advertise their self-prescribed religious standards to the world.

The stereotypes of Catholic clergy that have resulted from this attitude toward their supposed repression have been displayed in various forms over the history of film. The tradition of repressed and guilt-ridden Catholics, especially clergy, has been seen in films spanning genre and style, from animation in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to drama in *Doubt* to horror in any number of "nunsplotation" films, mostly produced in the 70's and 80's (Cowan 239). According to Douglas E. Cowan the specific trend of nunsplotation portray a sinister, sexualized portrayal of the Catholic female religious:

Born of the most durable and misogynistic of Christian myths—that woman is a temptress at best, evil incarnate at worst—nunsplotation films are a late modern reflection and refraction of two linked obsessions [...]: fear about what was popularly

believed to take place behind their walls, and a fetishistic fascination with the women religious who lived within (244).

The manifestations of this attitude have been done and redone to the point where the trope is expected; the repression of nuns and priests becomes central to the way they behave. In one manner, the repression of nuns may be reflected in their inevitable cruelty and sternness to their charges. Alternatively, a nun may be portrayed as innocent and angelic. If this is the case, then she will always be in the prime of her life, and treated by the film and the characters in it as a waste of female beauty and sexual potential, a source of obsession which occasionally feeds into the idea of hypersexuality in nuns. Priests, on the other hand, represent the more insidious side of the Church. He will almost certainly be secretive, manipulative, and hypocritical, under the guise of fatherliness. The recognition of these tropes is what *American Horror Story: Asylum* relies upon as a celebration and exploration of the genre.

In no way does *Asylum* more effectively express its attitude of distrust and suspicion of hypocrisy in clergy than in the character of Monsignor Timothy Howard. In many ways, he is the most reasonable and least dramatic of all the characters in *Asylum*. He is educated, progressive, well-intentioned, and follows doctrine as closely as he feels he is able, and yet for all his virtues, the monsignor is constantly made a fool of. He calls the possessed Sister Mary Eunice “clever and forward-thinking,” and several episodes into the show, it is revealed that the monsignor is the one sponsoring Dr. Arden’s horrific human experiments in the name of finding a cure for tuberculosis. His physical absence from the asylum means that he does not know the extent of Arden’s experiments until it is too late, and when he confronts the doctor, Arden threatens to expose everything in Briarcliff, which would thwart the monsignor’s ambitions of

going to Rome. This moment reveals the distinctly immoral extent of the monsignor's pride and ambition, the brand of which is often suspected as encouraged by the structure of Church hierarchy. By displaying its most reasonable representation of Catholicism in such a way, *Asylum* makes a comment on the structural failures of the Catholic Church, which so often seems to value that hierarchy and order over any consistent morality. Such a suspicion is reminiscent of clear moral failings in real life, such as the current controversy over pedophilia in the Church. The horror in the Church's reluctance to publically denounce those who are doing a clear and incontrovertible wrong does not speak favorably to Catholicism's ability to follow its own doctrine.

The monsignor's ambition and hypocrisy culminates in the most dramatic and irreverent use of Catholic iconography in the show. When serial killer Leigh Emerson professes to have found God after his near death, the monsignor sees his chance to provide Rome with another example of his soul-saving ability and takes Leigh on as his personal project. "You could be my miracle, Leigh," he says. "If I can turn a man like you towards Christ, imagine the reforms I could make on a national scale, not just mental health. Believe me, if I ascend to the highest ranks of the Church, I won't back down from the fight." The next time we see the monsignor, he's been nailed to the chapel crucifix and Leigh Emerson is nowhere to be found.

Leigh Emerson's fake conversion does not seem to serve any plot point except the humiliation and torture of the monsignor. As one of the more genuinely insane inmates at Briarcliff, the joy he gets out of his deception simply seems to be the game of it; proving how easy it is to take advantage of someone as self-involved and gullible as the monsignor. His crucifixion, then, seems to be a direct mockery of his piety, more from the point of view of the

show that Leigh Emerson, who escapes and is never seen again. For using a potential conversion as a tool for furthering his own endgame, the monsignor is subjected to the same kind of torture his Church constantly refers to in the crucifix. Extended, the symbolism of this action may reflect on the show's opinion of the hypocrisy of the Church itself as a "moral" institution, which so often seems to remove itself from the kind of guilt and humility it prescribes to its followers.

With this attitude *Asylum* punishes the monsignor every chance it gets, seeming to equate him with its most despicable villains. Of all his moral failings, the show seems to frame his final promise to find a way to release Sister Jude as being among the worst. Though he seems sincere, and Jude's instinct is to believe him, her experience has taught her better. "The cruelest thing of all, Timothy, is false hope," she says in response to his promise. To his very end he is, ironically, unrepentant, concealing the horrors at Briarcliff for personal gain until he is finally hounded and driven to suicide by Lana Winters several years later, an action that he himself describes as a voluntary relinquishment of your God-given grace and commitment of yourself to Hell.

American Horror Story's point about various nun tropes in the history of horror movies is similarly made clear almost immediately. Jessica Lange, in a complete reversal of the character she played in the first installment of the show, is the epitome of the cruel, zealously pious and authoritarian nun. As an audience, our first introduction to Sister Jude is walking in on her shaving the head of a patient of Briarcliff for some sort of sexual misconduct. She exudes sternness and judgment, even to the nonreligious and extremely independent reporter Lana, who, in a split-second shot, is shown straightening her jacket in Sister Jude's presence. At the

same time, we are introduced to Sister Mary Eunice, who embodies the other stereotype, submitting to Sister Jude's authority in a way that is both fearful and fawning.

The character arcs of Sisters Jude and Mary Eunice soon come to embody every stereotype about nuns expressed in film. It soon becomes clear that Sister Jude is as sexually repressed and pining as Sister Mary Eunice is naïve and vulnerable. In her preparation for her meeting with the monsignor, Sister Jude is shown preparing wearing red lingerie, applying perfume, with her hair out of its veil and falling in improbably perfect curls down her shoulders. This scene, significantly, is shot in the most flattering way possible, and set against choir music and shots of her praying in her habit, as is her later fantasy of seducing the monsignor later on when they discuss their plans for the future. As is the way with this archetype of religious women, her repression seems inseparable from her cruelty. Sister Jude, in her attempt to accomplish God's will, is of a one-track mind on every issue, from the morality of Hollywood to mental illness itself. "Mental illness is the fashionable explanation for sin," she says, before adding that the patient she shaved was simply "the victim of her own lust." *American Horror Story* has often been considered to be a rather opinionated commentary upon current events in society. If this is true, then the hypocrisy in Sister Jude's statement and the conviction with which she says it speaks not only to the effects of religious repression, but those of the repression of the 60's, which, as a decade, is portrayed as morally more in line with Sister Jude than Lana Winters, who eventually is committed to Briarcliff for homosexuality, which would have still been considered an "illness" then.

Sister Mary Eunice, on the other hand, begins the series as someone who is clearly ill-equipped for her position at Briarcliff. She is childlike in her innocence and misplaced

willingness to obey orders, happily feeding Dr. Arden's mutant experiments but later going through an existential crisis about whether she should or should not have a bite of a candy apple, because "Sister Jude says sweets lead to sin." Nun fetishizing is introduced in the mad scientist archetype (and ex-Nazi) Dr. Arden, portrayed by James Cromwell. He, along with several others in the show, is fascinated by Sister Mary Eunice, but Dr. Arden lusts after her for reasons beyond her beauty. In one of the more unsettling scenes of the season, he hires a prostitute, preparing dinner for her and mock-courting her with wine and classical music. When she tries to initiate more, he threateningly displays the carving knife, telling her that if she cannot speak like a lady, then he would just as soon she not speak at all. He then has her take off all her makeup and dress in a nun's habit. While she is changing, she finds some photographs belonging to Dr. Arden of women tied up and demeaned, escalating to women who have been dismembered. He catches her doing this and she escapes despite his attempts to assault her. Of course, it is no mistake that the prostitute looks just like Sister Mary Eunice.

As that scene and others which follow it demonstrate, the preoccupation with nuns in film is the result of a clash of expectations. Dr. Arden's admiration of Sister Mary Eunice is derived primarily from her innocence and modesty. Strangely, he has no interest in her and in fact becomes enraged when she propositions him later on. His fetish is specifically related to Mary Eunice's purity, which in Dr. Arden's eyes would become ruined if he were to actually fulfill his fantasy. The conflicted relationship between eroticism and chastity in nuns has been a subject time and time again in film, most often in the "nunsplotation" genre that, as Douglas E. Cowan describes, "exploit centuries of fascination with, fantasizing about, and fear of the Roman Catholic female religious" (239). As he points out, though the most evident example of

fetishizing nuns in our era is through film, the attitude toward them is not new. Suppositions of what happens in convents have been the subject of artistic conjecture for centuries, the ritualism and sense of power and secrecy associated with the Church casting suspicion and causing fascination with, as is often the case with studies of women, their sexuality. The sexual repression of Catholic clergy, the way it is portrayed nunsplottatively, seems almost too insistent, the result of a presumed zealousness that must imply the presence of some darker impulse beneath the habit. *Asylum*, as a pastiche of horror portrayals reproduces the expectations set by nunsplottation in its portrayal of Sisters Jude and Mary Eunice. Catholicism is cast in many ways as an inherently dark and sinister religion in the show, and, keeping with the tradition of horror that came before it, the types of horrors that the nuns in *Asylum* represent are sexual in nature (compare this with Monsignor Timothy Howard, whose horror lies in secrecy and corruption).

Mary Eunice's behavior toward Dr. Arden, which ends up causing a rift in the already touchy relationship between him and Sister Jude, is the result of another exploration into the theme of "nuns gone bad." A boy is brought to Briarcliff after speaking in tongues and having killed a family cow and eaten her heart. Sister Jude recommends an exorcism and the monsignor approves it, but the demon proves too much for the exorcist, who is unceremoniously thrown into the wall, and for Sister Jude, who succumbs to its taunts. It causes a blackout at Briarcliff and a heart attack in its teenage host, just as Mary Eunice comes to retrieve Sister Jude for help. As the boy dies, he makes eye contact with Mary Eunice, who passes out as the crucifix on the wall falls to the ground and the lights come back on. When she wakes up, her personality has changed. She has become confident, outgoing, immodest,

sarcastic, witty, brash. Aware of Sister Jude's haunting memories of alcoholism and being responsible for a hit-and-run that killed a child, the reason Sister Jude joined the Church in the first place, Mary Eunice torments her, leaving her altar wine and newspaper clippings from 1949, when the hit-and-run occurred. Slowly, Sister Mary Eunice, who used to be such a doormat, asserts complete power over Briarcliff and everything that happens there, and in doing so, fulfills yet another stereotype of the evil temptress that Cowan suggests is the result of Christian myth (244), secretly seducing and manipulating her way to power in the way that only a woman uncontrolled by men can.

As Peter E. Dans puts it, "non-Catholic moviegoers from the 1940's through the 1970's could be forgiven for believing that all nuns are stunning" (343). In the Golden Age of Hollywood, Ingrid Bergman, Jennifer Jones (called a "real lady" by Sister Jude), Audrey Hepburn, Loretta Young, and other young movie stars of the time defined the public image of nuns to society. The portrayal of them in this time period seemed to follow the old Hollywood cliché that "beautiful" equals "good" in all ways, but such a storytelling tactic in film takes on a somewhat different meaning when applied to nuns. Though the nuns as characters may have taken vows of chastity, they are inseparable from the star personas of the celebrities that portray them, most of whom were known or at least advertised primarily for their desirability. Understandably, then, if a nun in film is not overbearing and draconian, she will probably be displayed as outstandingly beautiful, optimistic to the point of unbelievable innocence. The fact that this is the stereotype of how "good" nuns look and act raises some questions about what reaction Hollywood expected its audience to have to these portrayals. Many of these films were made under the Hays Code, which, under the direction of the Catholic-run Legion of Decency,

forbade “ridicule of the clergy,” (Motion Picture Production Code) which could explain some of the emphatic goodness of the nuns. But whether it was an intentional side effect or not, making nuns the epitome of human beauty and desirability implies a sacrifice associated with that same beauty. Douglas E. Cowan cites an article by Thomas Cogan, a doctor who wrote for the *New York Magazine* about his travels in Europe. He writes about his visit to a convent and remarks upon finding out that there are “only twenty-eight” nuns that live there:

My imagination immediately took fire—I contemplated them all as in the bloom of youth and beauty, formed to enjoy and communicate happiness in civil and in the conjugal state! [...] “Good God!” cried I, “*only* twenty-eight of the loveliest of the human species buried alive within this gloomy mansion? Do you say *only*, Madam?”

(Cogan, 1797, 134-35)

Cogan’s reaction speaks to a form of misogyny revealed by “favorable” portrayals of nuns, namely that the objectification of women for their sexual worth turns nuns into an image not only of repression, but of tragedy, as they will never be allowed to fulfill their ultimate potential as women. This implied “tragedy” of nuns is the root of the public’s fascination with and fetishizing of them as innocent angels, exalted and desirable because of their removal from the rest of the world. “I admired her purity. Her innocence,” says Dr. Arden. “I never had any, even as a boy, and now it’s been taken from her.”

Alternatively, this seclusion and refusal to comply with the sexual expectations of mainstream society as portrayed by nunsplotation, especially in the horror genre, can be seen as a source of suspicion and threat. Protestant England produced a huge amount of anti-Catholic art and literature, much of it erotic, playing upon the public perception of the secrecy

of the clergy and their sexual hypocrisy (Urstad 192). Nunsplotation films such as *Demonia* (1990) and *The Other Hell* (1981) continued that tradition, portraying nuns as sinister and in league with the devil. In these cases, the nuns' vows of celibacy themselves become markers of sexual "deviation." Inevitably, the nuns are revealed to secretly be hypersexual, and often use their sexuality as a source of power. In such films "lust is clearly seen as one of the vehicles used by those who would subvert the dominant social or religious order" (Cowan 238). Sister Mary Eunice, transformed from the innocent, almost childlike nun into a lustful and manipulative monster, occupies both archetypes of nunsplotation, as she keeps just enough of the image of the pious nun for no one to recognize her possession. Her goal, to take over the Church by way of the monsignor's ambition, taking Jude's place in his plan to get to Rome, culminates in her rape of him, a final and desperate attempt to corrupt and bend him to her will. Such portrayals of nuns as the ones Sister Mary Eunice exhibits imply a fear not just of the suppressive sexual standards of clergy, but of a more general fear of women who have chosen not to fit the dominant social structure of direct sexual submission to men.

In the style of many of the religiously-themed films that came before it, *Asylum* focuses on the fallible human nature within the structure of Catholicism, present there as it is in the structure of every other social organization. France Forde Plude, for example, cites a few reasons why the current Catholic sexual abuse scandal was so hard to quantify. One of these reasons is Catholicism's "culture of secrecy and confidentiality". (182) The tendency of Catholicism to move offending priests to other locations rather than take any real action in response to the clear moral wrong reflects upon a failing of the religion's infrastructure to enforce its own laws. Though this may be the case, *Asylum* interestingly never derides the belief

in a higher power holistically. In the end, it is the Mother Superior who finally ensures Lana's release from Briarcliff at the request of the newly committed Sister Jude, giving Lana her records so she can do a full exposé on the institution. Though Mother Claudia is obviously a believer, I would argue that she is not a representation of *Asylum's* attitude toward the Catholic Church in the same way that the monsignor is, because the show portrays her as having gone against the status quo of the Church by speaking out against its actions. Later on, Lana mentions that Mother Claudia was transferred to Puerto Rico the moment she started "making noise" about what happened at Briarcliff. This portrayal of the turning of the Catholic Church against its own seems to indicate much more of a distaste for corruption and the horror that corruption produces than for religion itself.

Of the direct pop culture references in *Asylum*, perhaps the most important is the song "Dominique," played in maddening perpetuity in the common room of Briarcliff Asylum. Anyone who tries to stop the record is punished. One of the few foreign-language songs to ever top the charts in the U.S., "Dominique" is more interesting for the pop culture sensation it made of Sister Luc-Gabrielle, known professionally as "Sister Smile" or "The Singing Nun." For a time, this song and the Debbie Reynolds movie based loosely on Sister Luc-Gabrielle's life turned her into an improbable celebrity (Edge). As Peter E. Dans notes, "this is a case where the real story, some of which was unfolding as the film [*The Singing Nun*] was being made, is much more interesting—in a sad way—than the movie version." In the movie, the renamed Sister Ann finds fame, rekindles a romance with a man she knew before entering the convent, and keeps true to her faith, ending up leaving to be a missionary in Africa (190). The real Singing Nun, however, had a much harder and more tragic life than her movie counterpart. After falling in

love with a novice nun, leaving her convent to live with her and enduring the backlash such an action resulted in, she received notices of back-taxes owed for the proceeds of “Dominique,” all of which had gone to her order and none of which her order kept documentation. She and her partner killed themselves in the wake of their financial ruin in 1985.

The use of “Dominique” as a motif in *Asylum* is too perfect to be a mistake. Insistently cheery and upbeat, it provides an anxiety-inducing backdrop to the grime and degeneracy in every other aspect of Briarcliff, as well as being true to the era in which it was most popular. However, the fame that made “Dominique” and its artist so popular is inseparable from the attention that killed her. It serves not only as a reminder of the power of the entertainment industry to create and destroy, but also the extent to which the image of nuns is subject to the media that portrays them. The persona of The Singing Nun was itself a caricature, a member of the order of silly, quaint little sisters to which Sister Mary Eunice belonged pre-possession. The very existence of that persona (and by extension any clergy stereotype) denies any humanity to the clergy who are subject to it, in Sister Luc-Gabrielle’s case to the point of her literal death. The not-so-subtly symbolic moment of Sister Jude smashing the record saying “things are gonna change around here” after a sincere apology to Lana for everything she had done to her seems to deny the very stereotypes about nuns that *American Horror Story* has re-presented to its audience, acknowledging the human under the habit, and granting her some individuality from within the entertainment system that dehumanized her.

Iconography and Symbolism

The last scene of the last episode of *Asylum* is a flashback. Going back to the first episode, the scene reminds us of the order that both main female characters of the season operated under at the beginning of the show; an order which was so swiftly and cruelly dismantled as the story progressed. Sister Jude, stern and authoritative in the power she still held then, and Lana Winters, on her initial undercover mission to report the serial killer Bloody Face, repeat their first conversation in Briarcliff. Their ignorance of things to come takes on an ironic tinge when viewed again with the knowledge of how fragile the two women's worlds actually are. However, the series is not content with allowing the audience to forget their own worlds when they consider this new perspective. Abruptly, the audience is put in Lana's position as Sister Jude looks straight at the camera, portentously saying "Just remember, if you look in the face of evil, evil's gonna look right back at you." As Lana nods nervously and walks past her, Sister Jude takes a moment to look admiringly at the clean, white statue of the Virgin Mary, who is positioned and shot in such a way that she appears to return the gaze. Sister Jude leaves, and the last shot the audience is given of *Asylum* is a bird's eye view centered on the statue, pulling out, with the patients' chaotic activity in slow motion around her.

The moment, more of an epilogue than a true ending, anchors the season in its original setting. Most of the last episode is removed from the asylum, set in present day rather than the 60's and spanning the several decades in between. The choice to finish off the season in Briarcliff makes sense, since the institution is the main setting of the story, but the focus on Catholic iconography in those last few moments is where the meaning of the scene lies, as it has for much of the season. *Asylum's* relationship with Catholicism as a religion is based on the

distrust in it that has been displayed in multiple art forms over the history of the religion. The last images of the season are an efficient reiteration of that idea. The irony of Sister Jude's exchange of looks with the statue right after she tells Lana (and the audience) about what happens when you "look in the face of evil" cannot have been lost on Ryan Murphy. In light of that comment, the statue takes on a sinister connotation, as she does in the opening credits. When the camera pulls out, the statue appears as the dominating force around which everything in the asylum orbits. Despite the disarming appearance of the statue, the religious context she represents is morally gray at best, as had been demonstrated throughout the season that precedes the scene.

In addition to the status of the Virgin Mary as being the ironic face of Briarcliff, she is also significant in the way her symbolism is at odds with a defining theme of the show: femininity and motherhood. The Virgin Mary is the dominant female symbol within Christianity, particularly Catholicism. The devotion shown her in Catholic dogma may initially point to a brand of respect the religion has for women, but this respect is for a particular, idealized woman with an equally idealized purpose, specifically motherhood. As Sarah Arnold notes, the repetition of the image of the Virgin Mary in art, and later movies, "serves to reinstate pregnancy within the dominant ideology of patriarchy" (158). The version of pregnancy and motherhood displayed by her is one of sacrifice, an endorsement of the idea that the ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction of a woman is and should be the pain of birth and the hardship of raising her child. The degree of this this sacrifice is what determines a woman's saintliness (Arnold 17).

Considering this, it is interesting to note the lengths to which *Asylum* undercuts the Catholic sanctification of motherhood. There are three pregnancies and births in the season. Two are conceptions by design, caused by aliens, already a quasi-blasphemous reversal of the Christian ideal of child-bearing. The third is the Lana's baby by Dr. Thredson, the result of his kidnapping and rape of her. Significantly, the root of Dr. Thredson's insanity is his self-professed mother complex, his killing inspired by his constant search of a woman he thinks can provide the love he sees as having lost when his own mother abandoned him. In light of this, Lana's pregnancy completes the deconstruction of motherhood as displayed by Catholic doctrine and mythology. The "pro-life" voices of the season come from the two least in the position to give it: Dr. Thredson and Sister Mary Eunice. Mary Eunice's reaction to the pregnancy seems particularly relevant as something of a mockery of the stringent anti-abortion morality that Christianity often expresses. Mary Eunice herself seems to be using the stereotypical persona of moral righteousness exemplified by Catholic clergy when she makes it clear that Lana will be having the baby, going so far as to say "Praise God" in reaction to Lana's unsuccessful self-abortion. Of course, it is heavily implied that Mary Eunice knows exactly what kind of person the son of Bloody Face is destined to turn into.

In keeping with the feminist themes of the season, Lana's attacks at the hand of Dr. Thredson seem to additionally subvert the Catholic ideal of maleness as superior to femaleness in the absence of motherhood. Her experience is traumatic to an extent that transcends the rape itself, extending the extreme personal invasion one goes through with such a violation to Lana's entire life, as her partner is murdered and she herself is terrorized by Dr. Thredson inside the asylum and out. Theresa Sanders explores Catholic ideology as it applies to cases of rape

with the oft-repeated story of St. Maria Goretti, an eleven-year-old peasant girl who fought off her would-be rapist, getting stabbed thirteen times in the process and forgiving her attacker before she finally died. The story is one of several Catholic stories of women revered for resisting rape, a common theme that, as Sanders points out, is problematic for several reasons. Though there is certainly courage in Maria Goretti's resistance, the ability to make a personal choice of what to do in such a situation is not what most Catholic retellings of the story focus on. Instead, Maria Goretti's story, which was made into a movie: *Love's Bravest Choice*, is used as an example of how to manage one's sexuality as a Catholic teen, referring to Maria's "choice" to not be raped and troublingly implying that it is better to be dead and "pure" than live and recover from a sexual assault (42). Such an approach to sexual assault in the Catholic tradition relates to *Asylum's* Catholic context and Lana's place in it. The show makes it clear that what Lana is subjected to in *Asylum* is in no way under the control of her choice. The implication of stories recounted in the way Maria Goretti's often is, which is that if a woman is raped then the ultimate burden of morality lies upon her and not her rapist, is a theme often found in Christian teachings, a moral standard that society still finds difficult to reject in modern discussions about rape. The context of Lana's experience is a highly moralistic one that by this point has made clear its position on a woman's role in sex, a position which Lana defies, not only in the horror of how her experience happens, but in her decision to regain control over her life afterward.

Lana herself makes no secret of the understandable revulsion she feels at the idea of having the baby, an attitude that *Asylum* is clearly asking us to sympathize with, if not entirely share. Lana, as well as all the characters in *Asylum*, is the victim of a huge amount of suffering,

both emotional and physical. In Lana's case, much of what she endures is a direct result of her pregnancy and the events surrounding it. However, none of Lana's pain is portrayed as being an ultimate good, even and especially her pregnancy. She and the twisted form of motherhood she is forced into is a complete reversal of the image of Madonna and Child. Her son is the result of a tremendous amount of pain and sacrifice, but contrary to the traditional view of motherhood, the child in this case becomes a representation of suffering, rather than a reward for it. Lana defies the common display of motherhood in most movies that Mulvey describes, where the mother is only significant in relation to or through her child or the man who helped create it (Arnold 19). This is an idea that is essential to the Christian perception of the Virgin Mary, and one that Lana refuses to exemplify. Lana's birth scene is a blatant expression of this. After Lana gives birth the nurse brings her the baby she expressly said she never wanted to see. He isn't eating, and the nurse thinks maybe he would if he breastfed. Lana refuses at first, but then does so reluctantly, under a crucifix hanging above the bed, which she sees upside down as she leans her head away from her baby.

The Virgin Mary may be the most obvious example of Catholic iconography in *American Horror Story: Asylum*, but her ultimate importance in the season does not overshadow its many other examples of sacred images. Catholicism is a notable sect of Christianity partly because of the importance of physical representations of the sacred. Rosaries and crucifixes are not only displayed as evidence of faith, but used as ritual conduits for religious power, making them an aesthetically useful method of monster-vanquishing in film. *Asylum* works with the viewer's expectation of how such religious devices are used, as it does with other well-known horror staples, but does so in an uncharacteristically understated way, when the Monsignor attempts

to exorcize Sister Mary Eunice. His use of the rosary to guard against the demon's influence is subtle, as is his eventual physical use of it against her. Ultimately, though, the rosary is only useful in causing discomfort in her, and she easily shakes it off. This follows the later religious horror tradition of laying the focus more on the challenged character of the exorcist than the power of God inherent in things like rosaries. At such times, as *The Exorcist* and movies like it demonstrated, it becomes hard to find a reason to keep faith when the Devil makes his job look so easy.

Nevertheless, *Asylum* does acknowledge "God" or at least something like him in moments like the monsignor's attempted exorcism. Death's character in *Asylum* is another example of this, as she denotes a Christian referent in the same way that the demon possessing Sister Mary Eunice does. As in most religious horror, the presence of supernatural evil implies the existence of a supernatural good, a dichotomy which is explicitly demonstrated in these two characters. However, following the tradition, the religious institution meant to carry out the force of good on earth is not a reliable source of morality. Even Death, as the most physically present example of heavenly influence, does not seem to simply represent "good." At best she is a neutral force, never judging, offering comfort and advice to the dying but never intervening on behalf of the innocent. Overall, the representations of a supernatural force for good in *Asylum* do not seem as clear-cut in their intentions as the representations of evil. They seem more ambivalent, calling into question the extent of the power supposedly embodied in their sacred icons. The demon residing in Sister Mary Eunice, for example, is said to be able to tolerate being surrounded by religious icons by relying on the purity of the nun's soul, but the

show does not bother to explain what the consequences would be for the demon if it did not have Sister Mary Eunice as its shield.

The supernatural power of sacred icons as displayed in religious horror has other implications for how Catholicism has historically been perceived. Les and Barbara Keyser, in their unsympathetic analysis of *The Omen*, note that in the movie, "As frequently happens in the Hollywood catechism, Roman Catholicism falls somewhere between voodoo and shamanism in its rationality and efficacy" (230). As a more humanist approach to the historical importance of Catholicism in society, *Asylum* does not appear to rely quite so much on the more occultist method of portraying Catholicism as it is seen in other examples of religious horror. However, the atmosphere of the asylum does appear to play off expectations the audience may have about Catholic environments within the horror context. Though the Catholic representatives in the season appear to have things under control, unlike the frenetic and borderline insane priests of *The Omen* that Les and Barbara Keyser are referring to, it is clear that they do not, no matter how much they try to deny it. The physical evidence of the evil they are purportedly trying to keep out is everywhere, eventually dawning on Sister Jude, though not on the monsignor, who takes an embarrassingly long time to understand that the spiritual quality of the asylum he was so prepared to brag about to Rome has been irreparably compromised.

The history of Catholicism in horror implies a generalized suspicion of what the religion is hiding and how much of its doctrine and supernatural expertise can be trusted. In *The Omen*, for example, the representative of Catholicism were portrayed as well-meaning but ultimately inept; either off-puttingly zealous or morally compromised, blind to the forces that are

producing the antichrist from inside the Church itself. *The Exorcist*, along those same lines, touches upon the ultimate incompetence of Church representatives to effectively fight the presence of evil, either as a result of or in reference to their own personal failings. The focus on Catholicism in film as a conduit for such explorations of the supernatural seems to rely heavily on the use of religious iconography, and the portrayal of religious ritual in Catholicism is most obvious when it is anchored by physical objects of faith. To this end, the art direction in *Asylum* makes clear its position on Catholicism as a social authority, juxtaposing the most sacred Catholic icons with the degrading and filthy environment of the asylum.

Catholicism is defined in the public image as much by how it looks as how it behaves. In film, the images of Catholic iconography and symbolism have become synonymous with the actions of the Church itself. This manifests largely in the ways supernatural power is not only represented by crucifixes, holy water, and other ritual objects, but also by the way such objects are presented as literal physical conduits for power. Catholicism in *Asylum*, in following this filmic tradition, is not only presented as the surrounding circumstances of the events at Briarcliff but is itself a force that influences everything that happens in the institution, which is shown primarily through its iconography-heavy art direction. The type of horror exemplified in Briarcliff takes the religion as its framework of reality. Though Catholic doctrine and the lore it is based on is not always treated as fact (in fact, in some ways the opposite is true), the power of the Catholic images the audience is presented with are taken very seriously. These symbols carry physical supernatural power in the story, but more so, they represent the power the Catholic Church has had over the public mind for centuries, as a force for moral direction that has at turns been comforting, empathetic, and deeply destructive. Cast in the perspective of

American Horror Story's modern themes of social justice, the icons of Catholicism take on the attitudes of the society that surrounds the disenfranchised: domineering, oppressive, and less indicative of innate supernatural power than of social power, given to them by the social institution that made them.

A History of Catholic Horror

As I have mentioned, *American Horror Story: Asylum* is indivisible from the history of the horror genre that precedes it. I would add that while this is the case, the season and the show in general depends not only on the horror genre, but on the entire history of film, often making references to that history. This is certainly evident in the plot of the season, with its many horror archetypes borrowed from past horror, but *American Horror Story's* place in the larger scope of the medium of film is explored as well. *Asylum*, more so than the first season, has a thematic focus on the relationship that previous horror has had with social institutions such as Catholicism, which were heavily influential on the moral standards of society, especially in the mid-19th century (and arguably are to this day). To this end, the storylines of the patients at Briarcliff express a common theme in Ryan Murphy's shows: a blatant comment on social justice issues and a focus on experiences of the disenfranchised within larger society. Catholicism, as the defining moral police of the season, is used as an anchor for exploration into the lasting cultural effects of a highly moralistic American past. Its representation within the season, informed by its representation throughout history, facilitates this.

Every season of *American Horror Story* displays an almost overwhelming amount of stylization in its art direction and cinematography. Much of this stylization pays clear homage to the horror genre, sometimes in more subtle ways than others (the exorcist arriving dramatically in the middle of the night is a clear visual reference, and a section of score that sounds a lot like Pino Donaggio's "Bucket of Blood" from *Carrie* and another by Philip Glass from *Candyman* come to mind), but the overall aesthetic that differentiates this season from season one is *Asylum's* heavy reliance upon filmic standards of the past. The home life of the woman who

thinks she is Anne Frank, for example, is shot in a grainy, almost Super 8 style, reminiscent of old home movies. The method is one of the most time-specific in the season, referencing the intensely domestic ideal of the 60's but subverting it at the same time. Placing Anne Frank's scenes within the idyllic and familiar style makes the incidents of her psychosis that much more disturbing, underscoring the well-documented historical attitude of the 50's and 60's home ideal being one of suppression and misery under a thin veneer of happiness. The common use in the show of canted angles and fisheye lenses produce a disorienting effect in the show, but such embellishments also hearken back to the many filmic innovations that directors were producing in the mid-19th century. Overall, much of the aesthetic of *Asylum* is placed very specifically at a certain point in film history, further implying the season's status as a pastiche of historical film methods, not just in the horror genre but in film as a whole. This suggests that the season's treatment of Catholicism does not happen in a vacuum, but is directly related to its place in film history both aesthetically and culturally.

Sometimes *Asylum* expresses this idea through irony, as when Sister Jude announces that she will be screening movie to distract the asylum patients from the storm about to hit the East Coast. When Dr. Thredson expresses his surprise, Sister Jude says "Even I can concede that there are a few exceptions to the usual Hollywood dreck. The Archdiocese is loaning us a copy of *The Sign of the Cross*." For those familiar with the history of religious spectaculars and film as a whole, the joke here is obvious. Of the films the pious and strict Sister Jude could have chosen for her movie screening, *The Sign of the Cross* is perhaps the least appropriate. Famous for its lurid depictions of violence and debauchery, the film was one of the contributing factors in the formation of the Roman Catholic-run Legion of Decency, whose opinion was taken very

seriously by the film industry (Keyser 27). As Sister Mary Eunice says, the movie is “full of fire, sex, and the death of Christians. What fun.”

Ostensibly, *The Sign of the Cross* is a pro-Christian depiction of the first martyrs, with the depravity of the pagans there to highlight the moral superiority of the Christians (Sanders 39). However, as Cecil B. DeMille no doubt realized when he resisted the suggestions given to him by the Hays Code (Dans 40), the debauchery displayed by the pagans is a lot more compelling than the prudishness and purity of the Christians. In short, the pagans look like they are having a lot more fun, which is what drew in audiences and disgusted the religious. It is impossible to believe that any Catholic entity (especially in the 1960's) would possibly acknowledge anything redeeming about *The Sign of the Cross*, so the inclusion of it in *Asylum*, supposedly at the approval of the Church, raises questions about what Ryan Murphy was trying to convey with it. Possibly, the inexplicable adoration of the movie that comes from both Sister Jude and the demon inhabiting Sister Mary Eunice is another attempted jab at the hypocrisy and repression the season sees in the Catholic Church, where veneration of those who have suffered on one hand as displayed by the devoutly Catholic and a plain love of suffering on the other are not really all that different. Alternatively (perhaps additionally), the inclusion of *The Sign of the Cross* could be a nod to the type of aesthetic *American Horror Story* pays homage to—a reminder that outrageous violence and sex in film where the purpose is unclear or seems subordinate to the carnal aesthetic is nothing new, existing since the inception of film as a medium. When the movie is shown, the patients' attention (and Sister Mary Eunice's) focuses more on the salacious depictions of the pagans and the violent deaths of the Christians than any moral message the film might have, a portrayal of the audience reaction the Church feared.

At its release, the religious response to *The Sign of the Cross* can only have been due to an outrage at its perceived deception of audiences. The movie's religious label and its surface-level Christian morality were accused to only exist in service of ulterior motives, a common suspicion of much of the horror genre, and indeed, of Catholicism itself.

As a pastiche of a particular brand of "American" horror, the history of Catholicism and how it has been treated in the United States is instrumental to understanding the suspicions *Asylum* is playing off of. The United States, while not necessarily founded upon specific religious beliefs, was certainly created by a population that subscribed to a specific religion. The Puritans, who were the first inhabitants of the American colonies created a society that was exclusive of other religious adherences, often under pain of death, as demonstrated in cases of Quakers being executed for ignoring banishment from Massachusetts Bay Colony (Wills 15). In short, Catholics were not officially allowed within the country until 1773, which would be a repulsive enough idea to be counted as one of the grievances of the colonies against England. Anti-Catholic sentiment in early America lasted centuries within the country, and Catholics would still be considered outsiders essentially until the election of John F. Kennedy, at which point many of his opposers still argued that as a Catholic, his loyalty would first be to Rome and the Pope, not the United States of America (John F. Kennedy and Religion). This is a fact that is referenced in the very first episode of *Asylum*, as the monsignor cites JFK's election as a point of optimism for the Catholic cause; that the election is an example of how "this is a time when anything can happen if someone wants it enough." The monsignor sees the time he lives in as a potential turning point in the direction of Catholicism, as indeed it was, albeit not in quite the way he envisions.

The monsignor is presented as a relatively modern and forward-thinking member of the Church. As a clergyman, he seems to embody many of the new attitudes established by Vatican II, including an optimistic and progressive view toward science, and a focus on salvation of the most unfortunate members of society (Sander 139). The Church's mid-century efforts to, in a sense, update Catholic doctrine and practices to modern times resulted in a more inclusive, less restricting brand of Catholicism; a promising sign for many who thought the Church had become too harsh in light of the changes of modern society. Even so, *Asylum's* portrayal of the Church's ability to fit modernity into its doctrine cannot be called favorable, as is shown in the season's depiction of the battle between science and religion.

As much as Sister Jude and the nuns of Briarcliff are depicted from the beginning of the season as villains, they are no more so than Dr. Arden, the resident evil doctor archetype and ex-Nazi, who is experimenting with the patients of the asylum, mutilating and essentially turning them into zombies in an (admittedly unbelievable) attempt to create a human immunity to radiation should the Soviets ever drop a bomb. Sister Jude's instinctive suspicion of him is offset by his insistence that religion is little more than a superstition that gets in the way of the progress of science. Interestingly, the story of *Asylum* does not ally itself with either point of view. The result in any scene where the two appear together is a strange fight between ethically disastrous equals over how best to dominate the world.

The treatment of the various figures of authority in *Asylum* seems to imply a specific quality about the types of "scientific" and "religious" people who are exemplified in the show: that the power afforded them allows the more corrupt to serve their own interests and ambitions over the ones they purport to work for. Even the pious Sister Jude is willing to see

scientific methods of medicine as “just another tool in His bountiful tool chest” when she sees the need to administer some unnecessary and sadistic electroshock therapy, something she has the ability to do as the most powerful permanent authority figure at Briarcliff. Dr. Arden is alone in his work at the asylum, so his perception in the eyes of the audience at least has the possibility of seeming anomalous in the overall scientific community. The same cannot be said for the representatives of Catholicism. In fact, Dr. Arden may be counted as participating in the Catholic standard of the Briarcliff, as his presence there is endorsed by the Church, with Sister Jude’s concerns met with the reminder that Dr. Arden “was sent here by people better equipped to judge his godliness than you.” The monsignor’s approval of Dr. Arden’s work reveals a tacit cluelessness under his intellectual and sophisticated exterior, which becomes a running theme throughout the season. If the monsignor is meant to stand as a symbol for the general attitude of the Church during the 60’s, then even Catholicism’s relatively progressive acknowledgment of science in its doctrine seems blundering and willfully blind; a somewhat disingenuous attempt to attract followers despite the obvious conflict between religion and science.

This religion versus science theme plays out in the show as a whole, as the location of the asylum itself serves as a play on expectations previously set by media that came before it. Catholic-run institutions, and more specifically the failures of them, have been the subject of many films and TV shows over the years. Asylums, orphanages, homes for wayward youth, and other social services have been portrayed as controlled and often abused by Catholic authorities, an almost entirely unsuccessful conflation of science and religion. Though film certainly has the tendency to focus on the worst possible scenario, obviously and especially in

horror, this perception of Catholic-run institutions is not entirely the result of invention. Today, nearly 18 percent of all American hospitals and 20 percent of all beds in the nation's health care systems are owned or controlled by the Catholic Church, an overwhelming number for a religious organization (www.catholicsforchoice.org). It should be said that the Catholic Church does a significant amount of good. The mental health residential services of the Catholic Charities program, for example, are offered at no fee, rent is determined by ability to pay, and no one is turned away (Mental Health Residential Services). However, problems with such a religious presence in health care are certainly evident, as in the recent embarrassment of two Church-run hospitals in Cologne refusing to give the morning-after pill to a rape victim. (The New York Times) The statement issued by German bishops following that situation claimed that they did not know there were multiple forms of contraception and thought that all pill-form contraception was comparable to abortion, implying that previous to this outrage, these specific Catholic hospitals had a blanket ban on all contraception, or were at least unsure enough about how it works to specifically understand what they were objecting to.

This suspected (and in some cases verified) ignorance on the part of the Catholic Church is much of what informs its depiction in *Asylum* and in the stories to which *Asylum* refers. Implied in health care provided by the Church is a line separating religion and science that the Church is not willing to cross at a certain point, no matter the need of the patient. Though the Catholic health care system is based on the scripture-described responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves, this does not necessarily mean that religious doctrine equips the Church with the ability to do so. Sister Jude and her predecessors in films such as *The Magdalene Sisters* and any number of colloquial Catholic School horror stories present the

worst possible result of handing the control of something as important as healthcare and similar human rights over to religious authorities. She is the cancerous version of morality, for whom “mental illness is the fashionable explanation for sin” (in her own words) and for whom anything short of a perfect subscription to Catholic law is worthy of electroshock, all of which stems from her interpretation of the monsignor’s philosophy of mental health: that “the cure for the diseased mind lies in the 3 P’s: productivity, prayer, and purification.”

Asylum does everything but say explicitly that the ultimate result of such a strict moral attitude is the exclusion from society of anyone who does not precisely meet these expectations. Largely, the horror of the inmates at Briarcliff lies in the fact that almost none of them are there for true mental illness, or at the very least, the mental illnesses they experience are only exacerbated by the society that put them in Briarcliff and their stays at the asylum. Lana is the most obvious example of this, being institutionalized for homosexuality while her partner is blackmailed. Additionally, Grace is there for retaliating against sexual assault at the hand of her father, Shelley for retaliating against an openly cheating husband, and Pepper for the inability to speak for herself. Kit Walker’s interracial marriage is another example of social outliers, as the subject of a lot of talk among the town, and something the couple feels they have to hide, much like Lana’s relationship. Overwhelmingly, the main characters who are patients at Briarcliff are the victim of severe injustice at the hands of their society and the extreme moral expectations of their hyperbolically Catholic surroundings which, along with the outside world, take “different” to mean “abnormal” and therefore worthy of expulsion from greater society.

The past treatment of Catholicism in entertainment portrays it in a way that focuses on the ceremony of the religion; its archaism and frequent hypocrisy in its pretenses of moral superiority. Combined with and supported by residual suspicion of the religion from America's cultural past, Catholicism is tinged with a feeling of aesthetic and moral excess, something *Asylum* recognizes and takes to the show's trademark extreme, portraying Catholicism as "a creed of forms without substance, of vestments without commitments, of sacramentals without sanctity" (Keyser 205). Using these aesthetic standards of past horror as well as references to the famously intolerant society of the 1960's, the season compares Catholicism and the time period to each other, treating them as equally suppressive and similar in their tendency to make judgments and apply reactionary and destructive solutions to social "ills" they did not understand and were in little position to make informed decisions about. This is because the treatment of people who were considered abnormal was based upon an illogical set of rules based less on true overall public interest than tradition, no matter how good the intention.

Significantly, Sister Jude's ultra-Catholic approach to the treatment of patients at Briarcliff are portrayed as sadistic and outdated, but once she is ousted from her position, conditions at the asylum only worsen as power moves first to the monsignor and then to the state, at which point it becomes overrun with the cast-off people society would rather shut away and deny the existence of than deal with directly. While *Asylum* places the initial context of the horror of misplaced moralism of Catholicism, by the end of the season it is clear that the religion and its failings are only a facet of a larger, even more unforgiving culture. While the failings of Catholicism in *Asylum* lie in its "otherness," archaism, and corruption, all traditions in

horror, these problems are at the very least recognizable and easily defined. Harder to accept are the similar problems displayed in society as a whole, which, though it might claim to run on a more secular logic, is no better and potentially even more horrific than Sister Jude's worst punishment.

Conclusion

By the final episode of *American Horror Story: Asylum*, the Catholic presence in the diegesis has been dismantled. The organization that was so instrumental in the lives of the inmates at Briarcliff and represented such a force of power turns out to be much more fragile than it appeared at first glance. Sister Jude's reign is finished and her life ruined with the simple act of placing her in the very institution she once governed and denying her existence. Though she manages to die with some dignity left, Monsignor Timothy Howard's end can only be called pathetic, from his passive hope that the reporters and investigators following Lana Winters' trail will "tire and go away" to his final suicide, the result of Lana's pursuit and the weight of his own conscience. The last episode's departure from the time period of the rest of the show adds another layer to *Asylum's* attitude toward Catholicism. Though the religion seems ever-present at Briarcliff, defining the morality and meaning of the patients' lives and seeming to believe it will hold its position of power forever, the institution reveals itself as no more powerful than its representatives in the asylum, all of whom are brought down by their own human failings and incompetence in the face of evil. Throughout the show the Catholic presence sells itself as infallibly powerful, insurmountable in its influence and righteous in its cause. By the end, however, *Asylum* has reduced Catholicism to its most human elements, placing its players within the larger context of society and revealing it as ultimately no more than another social organization, with all the corruption, arbitrary rules, and hypocrisy that comes along with such structures.

The name "*Asylum*" carries more meaning than a simple description of the location of the show. "We picked 'Asylum' because it not only describes the setting," said Ryan Murphy,

“but also signifies a place of haven for the unloved and the unwanted. This year’s theme is about sanity and tackling real life horrors” (Deadline). The Catholic Church has had a long, scripture-informed history of providing for those who have been cast off from society. Vatican II, which would have occurred just prior to the events of the show, modernized the Church but also emphasized that all human beings have the right to food, clothing, shelter, and education, and that the knowledge of such morals places responsibility on the Church to provide these things for people to the best of its ability (Sanders 138-139).

However, the season takes place during a period of turmoil within the Catholic Church. The mid-20th century saw a massive exodus of clergy members from the Church over various controversies and disagreements over what the Church’s place should be in the lives of the global community. This was the period that saw Liberation Theology rise in Latin America, an idea that originated from Vatican II’s redefinition of the Church as comprised primarily of the laity, not the hierarchy (Sirico). At great risk to themselves, Catholic leaders in Latin America focused their attentions on the poor and underrepresented, protesting Catholicism’s apparent inaction on such issues and politicizing a social organization that for centuries had seemed impervious to such controversies. The changing society in the mid-20th century has been cited by Frances Forde Plude as a large cause for such a change in Church ideology, with a movement from dogmatism to pluralism, tension between celibacy and sexuality, a strong feminist movement and empowerment of the laity changing the face of Catholicism worldwide (182). The effect of this shift in Catholicism was evident in its changing representation through clergy. Since 1965, the number of Catholic priests in the United States has decreased by over 12,000.

The population change in vowed religious Sisters is even more dramatic, with an astounding 100,000 decrease in numbers.

The Catholics in *Asylum* are not, on their surface, representative of the changing Catholic scene in the 60's. They are portrayed much more in the manner of public perception from various stories in the media than how they actually probably would have behaved and looked at this point in the 1960's, when nuns by and large stopped wearing the traditional and recognizable habit and when many Catholic clergy took part in often radical causes of social justice around the world. Though *Asylum* is ostensibly a period piece, its particular form of genre pastiche does not make much of a focus of creating a realistic portrayal of Catholicism. Rather, the season uses the expectations most commonly displayed about Catholics by the religion's hugely important place in the horror genre to make its own comment upon what this image is meant to represent in modern culture as a whole. The Catholicism in *Asylum* is conservative to the point of severe and destructive repression, as demonstrated by Sister Jude's draconian moralism, but also pompous and out-of-touch, as seen in the monsignor, whose false progressivism only serves his own ambition, and whose lies get more and more out of hand the more he convinces himself that all his deception is in service of the greater good. From its relationship to previous form of media, its extreme aesthetic, and its themes, it is clear that *American Horror Story: Asylum* is not trying to portray an accurate picture of Catholicism as it was in the 1960's.

However, through its themes *Asylum* displays many of the issues Catholicism *was* historically dealing with at the time which caused such a sudden rearrangement of the way the Church operated. It can be said that the Catholicism portrayed in *Asylum* is representative of

the attitude of the old Church that was so secretive, manipulative, sexist, abusive, and focused much more on hierarchy than the good of the laity. Throughout the season, the division between Catholics and the people they care for is treated as one caused by misunderstanding and lack of empathy, a moral structure that the show implies as being impossible to sustain as society becomes more accepting. The story arcs of Lana and Sister Jude, in particular, show a definite feminist bent to the attitude of the show, contrasting with the severe moralism of the Catholic world they inhabit. Though the two couldn't be more different as people, their lives are equally traumatized by men. Dr. Thredson's terrorization, rape, and attempted murder of Lana are clear examples of this, but the monsignor's treatment of Jude is slightly more insidious, though no less destructive. Her complete devotion to him is taken advantage of repeatedly, as the outdated and suppressive Catholic ideology she subscribes to encourages her to undermine her own goals in service of his. His final betrayal of her and failure to keep his promise to get her out of Briarcliff (a task that is, significantly, completed to swift and efficient success for Lana by Mother Claudia) is what finally and permanently removes Sister Jude from the Church. Neither experience, however, is traumatizing to the point of complete destruction, though neither do they define Lana or Jude's worth as women as being through their endurance of suffering, as is often the suggestion of women in film (176). Rather, the two regain their agency by the end of the show, with Sister Jude's advice to Kit's daughter Julia encompassing the feminism of the season: "Don't ever let a man tell you who you are, or make you feel like you are less than he is."

Asylum, upon its release, was the source of a lot of ire on the part of modern Catholic organizations. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights released a statement criticizing

the season as “the most vicious assault on the character of Roman Catholic nuns ever aired” (Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights). When the statement was sent as a print advertisement to *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, it was rejected for publication, promoting even more anger from the Catholic community. Historically, Catholicism has some reason to take offense at its portrayal in film. As Philip Jenkins claims, anti-Catholicism in America seems to be a more acceptable form of bigotry than social issues such as racism or sexism, and one can find “anti-Catholic bias and rhetoric beyond what could be legitimate critique” (Plude 182). The horror genre may admittedly be one of Catholicism’s biggest enemies in terms of representation, constantly focusing on the failures of Church hierarchy and the hypocrisy it sanctions through inaction. Its status as the most aesthetically dramatic Christian sect makes it an easy source of material for films that make use of the more ritualistic facets of the religion, and which aim to relate to a Protestant Christian audience without offending them. However, such a focus on the ritualism, graphicness, and parts of Catholicism that suggest a more occult method of practice than Protestants are used to can trend toward exploitation and misrepresentation. The sensationalistic and corrupt depictions of clergy and Church hierarchy makes a good source for horror, but the question of whether such depictions harm the image of Catholicism in real life remains open.

However, I would argue that *Asylum* does not fit the mold of anti-Catholicism or Catholic exploitation in quite the same way as the media the Catholic League is referring to when it criticizes the show. Though it is true that many of the season’s depictions of Catholic imagery, practices, and history are outrageous in their aesthetic, the criticism in the show is more societal than religious, and exists independent of any ill it suggests in Catholic ideology or

practice. *American Horror Story* cannot and does not claim originality in its character archetypes, its monster archetypes, or any other material that makes up its particular type of horror. Instead, it is a pastiche, a recreation and homage to horror standards of the past, with the understanding that the audience, upon seeing them, will recognize the tropes enough to understand that a great many works have been contributing to this series long before the idea for the show ever appeared in Ryan Murphy's mind. In this way, *American Horror Story* owes its treatment of Catholicism to every piece of media before it that portrayed Catholic priests, nuns, iconography, and ideology as something to be feared. Its attention to the artifice of its own creation makes the show something more complex than the average horror movie aiming for nothing more than a couple of hours' worth of emotional disturbance. For its second season, the show chose Catholicism as its historically relevant context. But the moral scope of *Asylum* goes beyond a one-dimensional reading of anti-Catholicism. *American Horror Story: Asylum*, rather than disparaging religion or any particular religious body, comments on the dangers of corruption, lack of empathy and understanding, and intolerance toward the less fortunate; all of which are some of humanity's most omnipresent horrors regardless of one's religion, but which *American Horror Story* makes accessible through the recognizable lens of Catholicism.

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