Spirit Possession and Communication

Some things to consider
“Those who utilize these states, then, are most alienated from the total society, most demanding of immediate gratification, requiring immediate experiential evidence of the cult’s promises, a down payment, as it were, on the promised celestial rewards.”


• True?
States of Consciousness

- Waking State
- Sleep Dreaming
- Day Dreaming
- Hypnotic State
- Meditation
- Psychotic States (delusional, etc.)

- Chemically-induced states (drunk, stoned, etc.)
- Ecstasy?
- Trance?
Altered States of Consciousness in Global Perspective

• According to Bourguignon,
  – 90% of societies globally (based on a sample of 488 societies studied) have some form of institutionalized altered states of consciousness.
  – 38% of societies have some form of institutionalized practice of trance
  – 28% of societies have some form of institutionalized practice of possession trance states
  – 24% of societies have both trance and possession trance states.
  – Only 10% of societies surveyed have institutionalized neither state.
  – She also notes that 22% of societies believe in possession even when they do not believe in possession trance - most commonly, such possession beliefs are linked to theories of illness.

• Our society’s intolerance for altered states of consciousness therefore represents an anomaly, rather than the norm, globally-speaking.
The scientific frame

• In our society, when we do discuss altered states of consciousness, it is largely within an empirical, scientific framework
  – Sleep studies, etc.
• Our language – “altered state” – implies deviance, however – the waking state is the norm, everything else deviates from the norm.
• Our language also implies discrete “things” – “this” state of consciousness is different from “that” state – no sense of continuum of consciousness.
Christian-influenced “possession” beliefs in our society

- Demonic possession – negatively valued
- Possession by the holy Spirit – positively valued
- Neither form institutionalized by mainstream churches in North America
The Exorcist

• In this film, we can see both the religious “possession” explanation for an altered state of consciousness, and also the more mainstream, “acceptable” explanations for this altered state - namely, biological or psychological dysfunction (illness.) The film is interesting in that the search for a cure of “Regan”, the young girl afflicted with an unpleasant altered state of consciousness, follows the path from “most respectable” explanations to “least respectable” explanations.
Something is wrong with Regan: the biomedical diagnosis
Something is wrong with Regan: the psychological diagnosis
Something is wrong with Regan: religion as placebo
Something is wrong with Regan:
I think we need a priest

Warning: graphic and disturbing content – cover your eyes if you’re squeamish!
Spirit Possession in The Exorcist

• Having arrived at the “least respectable” diagnosis – demonic possession - the reality of spirit possession is affirmed in this film. But – the experience is undeniably and overwhelmingly negative – drawing from and reinforcing our society’s negative associations with spirit possession.
Possession by the Spirit of God

• I Corinthians 12:7-11 states: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. “

• While our society tends to search for biomedical and psychological explanations to explain demonic possession, we often turn to a different kind of non-religious explanation for this kind of possession – what might that be?
Gimme that old time religion...
Leap of Faith
Unpacking cultural assumptions:

• First, when studying the Spiritualists and Spiritists we will be looking at in our course, we should be aware that not all people who are, or claim to be, possessed, are physically or mentally “sick.” They are not suffering from physical or mental illness. They are simply manifesting a state of consciousness, and interpreting that state of consciousness, in religiously meaningful contexts.

• Second, not all people who are, or claim to be, possessed, are “possessed” by the Christian concept of demons or the devil. Just as we generally find it difficult to believe in possession at all, we equally find it difficult to believe that if possession exists, it can be a helpful, benign force. Neither secular rejection nor religious condemnation of possession experiences will do justice to the religious beliefs and experiences of the people we will be studying.

• Third, not all people who are or who claim to be possessed are frauds. Speaking in tongues, religious healing, and prophesy are all manifestations of altered states of consciousness, and like possession, are found cross-culturally and commonly throughout the world.

• Fourth, there is in fact some scientific basis for believing in the legitimacy of possession experiences. Blood chemistry, brain maps, physiological changes, glossolalia patterning, all point to the reality of the experience. If the explanation of the experience does not satisfy our skeptical natures, the experiences are nonetheless genuine, and their explanations at least have the virtue of coming from those who have the experiences.