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Malice in Wonderland: The Perverse Pleasure of the Revolting Child

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Malice in Wonderland: The Perverse Pleasure of the Revolting Child

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2010

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest thanks to all of the individuals who have provided me support during this phase of my life. Thank you to Dennis and François, who were present at different stages in this process, but who both patiently served as sources of positive reinforcement and never let me give in to self-doubt. Thank you to my excellent interns who worked with me through the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program. My deepest appreciation goes out to Charlotte, Chris, Jeffrey, Sarah, Aaron and Elizabeth, who performed many of the tedious tasks of finding films, cataloguing texts, and scouring message boards for anti-queer rhetoric. Also, thank you to the excellent scholars who were willing to read different versions of this dissertation and offer up their suggestions for revision and further reading, especially Linda Mizejewski and Kathryn Bond Stockton. Thank you as well to my dissertation committee—Julia Mickenberg, Jennifer Fuller, Harry Benshoff, Mary Celeste Kearney, and Janet Staiger. They each provided guidance and insight, and managed to make both my prospectus and my dissertation defenses feel like a conversation between scholars rather than a test of my academic meddle. Finally, thank you to my mom Kathy, who managed to raise a fairly unrevolting child.

Malice in Wonderland: The Perverse Pleasure of the Revolting Child

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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“Malice in Wonderland: The Perverse Pleasure of the Revolting Child,” explores the place of “revolting child,” or the child-as-monster, in horror cinema using textual analysis, discourse analysis, and historical reception study. These figures, as seen in films such as *The Bad Seed*, *Village of the Damned*, and *The Exorcist*, “revolt” in two ways: they create feelings of unease due to their categorical perversion, and they also rebel against the family, the community, and the very notion of futurity. This work argues that the pleasure of these films vacillates between Othering the child to legitimate fantasies of child abuse and engaging an imagined rebellion against a heteronormative social order. As gays and lesbians have been culturally deemed “arrested” in their development, the revolting child functions as a potent metaphor for queerness, and the films provide a *mise-en-scène* of desire for queer spectators, as in the “masked child” who performs childhood innocence. This dissertation begins with concrete examples of queer reception, such as fan discourse, camp reiterations, and GLBT media production, and uses these responses to reinvestigate the films for sites of queer engagement. Interestingly, though child monsters appear centrally in several of the highest-grossing films in the horror genre, no critic has offered a comprehensive explanation as to what draws audiences this

particular type of monstrosity. Further, this dissertation follows contemporary strains in queer theory that deconstruct notions of “development” and “maturity” as agents of heteronormative power, as seen in the work of Michael Moon, Lee Edelman, Ellis Hanson, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Kathryn Bond Stockton.

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Malice in Wonderland: The Perverse Pleasure of the Revolting Child

I think that many adults (and I among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.

--Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*¹

In August 2009, I attended a screening of the horror film *Orphan* (2009), just before it slipped out of the movieplex and into that brief abyss between theatrical release and DVD reissue. My delinquency in seeing the film was a shock to my friends and colleagues who had been emailing me images, articles, and reviews for weeks. Indeed, the poster design, with its black-eyed neo-Victorian child looming large below the tagline “There’s something wrong with Ester,” seemed the apotheosis of the research that had engaged me for two years. Part of my reluctance, I suppose, was the concern that the film would needlessly complicate everything that I had theorized thus far concerning the child-as-monster in horror cinema. I feared *Orphan* may have no place within my dissertation—itself a problematic child with no home. However the film—in which a nice

family adopts Russian orphan only to discover that she is, in fact, a deranged adult midget posing as a child—did not disappoint. In fact, it brought together multiple strains within this dissertation, in particular the manner in which these films reveal revolting children to be not children at all, after all, to allow for the representation of child abuse on screen.

Waiting for the film to begin, I noticed (or suspected) that the theater was unusually filled with gay men—I cannot be sure, of course, but the signs (the intimacy, the looking relations, and the coupled body language) along with the usual stereotypical markers told me that this film had a curiously queer clarion call. Now more attuned to the audience in the theater, I focused on those enunciations of anxiety, disgust, and pleasure that define the spectatorial relationship to the horror film.² In the film’s final act, I witnessed cries of pleasure and release as the childlike monster (revealed to no longer be a child) was vanquished—but more intriguing was the film’s previous 100 minutes, which often courted sympathy for Ester as a misunderstood and mistreated outsider. Indeed, the audience was no less vociferous in their pleasure when Ester physically attacked her grade school bully, leading at least one of my fellow spectators to yell “Get her!” as the would-be child monster pushed her tormentor off of a balcony. I rehearse this story to state simply that revealing the subgenre’s practice of Othering the child to enable fantasies of child hatred tells us only part of the story. The rest—the truly disavowed pleasure in the cinema of revolting childhood—is pleasure inherently more dangerous, more perverse, and more queer. If the cinema of revolting childhood creates a type of topsy-turvy Wonderland where children are empowered and adults are endangered so as

to ritualistically punish the child, then the looking glass reflects a certain pedophobic rage. But there is not one but *many* spaces of malice in these films: against the child, with the child, with the scene of desire.

It is the question of spectatorship and pleasure that guides this dissertation—in particular when and how audiences derive pleasure (authorized or not) from the cinema of monstrous childhood and what forms those pleasures take. In Andrew Tudor’s book *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Film*, he details the point in which the horror film gained blockbuster success in the United States. “Only occasionally,” he says, “has a horror movie transcended its specialization and attained real mass success. *The Exorcist* did so, as had *Rosemary’s Baby* (1969) before it and as would *The Omen* (1976) two years later.”³ One of the remarkable features of all three of these films is that the monstrosity at the center of each text is, in fact, a child. What does it mean for these movies, all about monstrous children, to achieve mass success?

In what has become a seminal text in the study of horror cinema, Robin Wood claims in “An Introduction to American Horror” that the child as a figuration of the Other is one of the major tropes of the horror genre. Children are one of many oppressed groups, Wood states, that stand in for the eruption of chaos into a tenuous space of social order. The monster stands in, then, for those abjected elements of the self and society that must be denied or assimilated to ensure the coherency of hierarchical structures.⁴ Several of these “othered” groups mentioned by Wood (the proletariat, women, non-white ethnicities, non-heteronormative sexuality) have been extensively examined within studies of the horror genre. Wood’s final group, however—that of children—has yet to be

given substantial treatment in critical accounts of the genre. Rather than assume that the child-as-monster is merely a miniaturized version of more adult, more “real” monsters, this dissertation argues for the singularity and the specificity of the child monster.

The particularity and peculiarity of the child warrants an emotional ambivalence that alights in the fact that “the child” is a figuration we have all occupied, though one that seems alien or lost to us. The oppression of children is a means of fortifying the boundaries between adult and child (to be “not like” adults) while at the same time preparing them to recapitulate the normative entry into adult sexuality (to become “like” adults). As Wood notes, the social order depends upon our impulse towards repetition-compulsion, to foreclose “what the previous generation repressed in us, and what we, in turn, repress in our children, seeking to mold them into replicas of ourselves, perpetrators of a discredited tradition.”⁵ In our ambivalent investments in children, they are fashioned as both our antithesis and our doppelganger. The child monster is, then, one of the most uncanny of monsters.

The child monster of which I speak comes in a number of forms, and I do not want to suggest that the figuration is a singular type. Indeed, the texts covered in this dissertation—*The Bad Seed* (1956), *Village of the Damned* (1960), *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *It’s Alive* (1974), *The Omen*, *Halloween* (1978), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Firestarter* (1984), and *The Good Son* (1993), to name a few—are quite varied in their portrayal of monstrosity. They cover a range of manifestations, all of which, however, are seen as incompatible with the body of the child. I employ the term “the revolting child”⁶ to engender a sense of cohesion for these

disparate texts. The term is useful for its dual-edged salience: these are figures that are “revolting,” which is to say, repellant. They are bodies that violate natural laws and order: adults living in children’s bodies, possessed or animalistic bodies, demonic offspring, zombified or spectral haunts, or supernaturally powerful catalysts. But these figures are also bodies in revolt: they traffic in the rhetoric and representational force of the youth movement and the nature of the “rebel,” a figure at once prized as distinctly American and yet vilified as disruptive and antithetic to the harmonious community. But perhaps the most disruptive quality of revolting children is that they have no need or desire to become replicas of their adult counterparts. They have found the discredited tradition that seeks to assimilate them and called it by name—lost boys (and girls) who have no interest in being found. In the words of Kathryn Bond Stockton, not all children grow “up” and complete the developmental narrative. Some, like the revolting children in this dissertation, “grow sideways,”⁷ accruing knowledge, power, and meaning without abandoning the uncanny liminality of childhood.

If childhood is, indeed, set apart as a transient state of not-yet-arrived, then the horror of the revolting child is that s/he is locked in a liminal stasis predicated upon contradiction: s/he is already-arrived, both-at-once, growing—but not growing up—in a land of never-never. The polymorphous perversity offers no promise of cohesion and erasure. These are vagrant youth, setting up house where the signs say “no loitering.” Revolting children are in a state of permanent impermanence.

Significance of Study

Though a number of critics have examined horror cinema as a mode that offers distinctive pleasures, few have engaged the child as a figuration that has particular salience and relevance for the genre. Critics such as Neil Sinyard and William Paul have addressed the genre as a pedophobic exercise that circumvents social taboos around child abuse to provide an outlet for child-hatred.⁸ These films, they argue, provide a forum to entertain ideas about children and their alienness in a manner generally foreclosed by a cultural insistence in children's ignorance, innocence, and dependence. While I do not disagree with this assessment, I also want to articulate the manner in which the films evoke an ambivalent response—one marked by horror at the child's "unchildlikeness," and indeed a pleasure at that very transgression. To relegate these films as mere expressions of pedophobic loathing or to uncover only what is "wrong" about the texts is to settle into what Eve Sedgwick has called the "paranoid" critical position.⁹ According to Sedgwick, paranoid reading seeks to uncover and expose hidden violences within the text and bring them to light. It arises from what Paul Ricoeur calls "a hermeneutics of suspicion,"¹⁰ in which all texts are potentially harmful and in need of uncovering. In this piece, however, I want to build upon the paranoid reading of the film, which focuses on its ideological perversity, and take up what Eve Sedgwick has called the "reparative" mode of critical engagement, which moves "away from existing accounts of how 'one' *should* read, and back toward a grappling with the recalcitrant, fecund question of how one *does*."¹¹ It is this question, of how readers might, can, and do derive pleasure from these texts (and how the text enables that pleasure) that guides this analysis. The pleasure

of the revolting child, I argue, is decidedly *queer* in its object and its aims—and provides an inroad to examine the child as an avatar, rather than an antithesis, of anti-heteronormative social praxis.

As conceived, this dissertation has significant implications for the fields of film studies, childhood studies, gender and sexuality studies, and reception study. For film studies, this dissertation will examine a series of significant cinematic events that have yet to be culled together in the semblance of a historical narrative. Taken apart, these films and their extratextual discourse, including the Hays Code controversy over *The Bad Seed* (1956) and its potential to corrupt innocent children, *Village of the Damned* and their “space-crafted Hitler youth,” the anxiety over *The Exorcist* and its potentially-corrupted lead actress, to the anxiety over birth defects which underpins the *It’s Alive!* series, remain independent formations, and not part of a continually negotiated cinematic trope spanning decades. Further, this work promises to extend some of the dynamic work done on the horror genre and its distinctive modes of pleasure, in particular how these films engage the family melodrama as an enabling subtext. It argues emphatically that any totalizing theory of the horror genre is incomplete without a consideration of the revolting child as a separate and distinct formation. Finally, film studies remains largely untouched by the vast and dynamic work done in childhood studies, and this work seeks to join the two, allowing the cultural studies framework of childhood studies to broaden the scope to include paracinematic texts.¹²

For childhood studies, detailed analysis of this recurring representation and its spectatorial pleasure will provide a much-needed investigation of the ways in which the

supposedly “natural” childhood qualities of dependence, innocence, and heterosexuality are always haunted by the spectre of their failure. As such zones of incompleteness are ever-present and yet unspeakable, their representation as horror should be seen as symptomatic of eruptions (as Wood puts it) of a repressed anxiety over the unattainability of normative childhood. Additionally, this dissertation proposes to re-examine such seemingly “positive” childhood representations texts such as *Home Alone*, *Matilda*, *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Harry Potter* and ask what degree of differentiation distinguishes these figures and texts from revolting bodies of the film cycle engaged here. As I will argue later, the distinction between the impish child of comedy and the demonic child of horror is a matter of mere degrees—to see the revolting child as a grotesque exaggeration of normative childhood argues for the specificity of the child monster within a broader representational landscape.

Given these considerations, my research questions coalesce around issues of development, eugenics, futurity, and power: First, how do we account for the persistence, popularity, and spectatorial pleasure of the child-as-monster figure in horror cinema? Second, as images of children generally serve the needs of adult bodies rather than the children they purport to represent, what function does the Othered child fulfill for adult spectators? Indeed, what are the “stakes” in animating a narrative of failed childhood development?

Secondary Literature

This dissertation takes, as a starting point, the assumption that childhood is neither self-evident nor natural. It is, as Henry Jenkins puts it, an indistinct and constantly renegotiated concept that must be “enforced and inculcated upon children.”¹³ As Philippe Aries claims in his seminal study *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, the concept of “childhood” did not exist in medieval society—a child was essentially seen as a miniature adult until s/he gained the capacity to earn a living. Likewise, childhood innocence seemed to be a foreign concept. As Aries says, no one before the eighteenth century worried about soiling childish innocence because “nobody thought that this innocence really existed.”¹⁴ Around the end of the seventeenth century, however, education became more of necessity and the family “unit” had become just that: removed from the public sphere and into a more private domicile; the family began to identify as a separate body. And this familial body became more and more centered on the child.

The Romantic notion of childhood, best evidenced in the works of Rousseau or Blake (who dreamed of a child “trailing clouds of glory”) was that of a sensual innocence, borne of joy and an intimate connection with nature. The Romantic child was a dreamer whose body, untainted by civilization, mobilized adult nostalgia and melancholy for a simpler, more pure state of being. In this form, adulthood was seen as an abandonment of that Edenic state—a fall from grace. However, this formation of childhood innocence was complicated in the Victorian era, as innocence was no longer seen as a quality to possess, but rather the cavity that remains when treacherous qualities

have been exorcised or warded off completely. As James Kincaid notes, “[c]hildhood, to a large extent, came to be in our culture a coordinate set of have nots, of negations: the child was the one who did not have.”¹⁵ Ellen Pifer similarly addresses this shift in her book *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* as one from creation to negation. As she says, “the innocent child was gradually becoming a static symbol of ‘withdrawal’ from life. As the emphasis shifted away from the creative celebration to ‘negative assertion,’ the romantic image of childhood became associated not with renewal but with moral and psychological ‘retreat’.”¹⁶

This is not to suggest that the child has made the passage from one formation to another, like a Hegelian formula of metaphoric progression and/or regression. Rather, the figuration of the child is cumulative. The child is, as Jenkins claims, “semiotically adhesive” (15). Children are meaning receptacles; they accrue values and attributions and rarely discard one formulation for another. They are simultaneously brimming with over-determined investments and yet they are semiotically unproductive. They are, in the words of Alison James and Alan Prout, “a muted group” who are subject to representation, but rarely are able to vocalize on their own behalf.¹⁷ This is why the revolting child takes so many various and nefarious forms: the sociopathic perfection of Rhoda Penmark in *The Bad Seed*, the wretched excess of Regan McNeil in *The Exorcist*, the icy silence of Damien Thorn in *The Omen*, the animalistic deformity of the killer infant in *It’s Alive*, or the Hitler Jugend-ness of the alien invaders from *Village of the Damned*. Indeed, the child itself is unstable, expansive in its unstructured polysemy, and so its grotesque form also accrues meanings and attributions.

Child and Horror

Sabine Bussing, in her book *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction*, offers a comprehensive overview of the changing modes of child representation in literature. As she notes, the child as monster or aggressor is a largely modern phenomenon with its advent in nineteenth-century Gothic literature where the child “displayed more and more activity, developing from a mere victim to a frequent aggressor, killer, a veritable monster.”¹⁸ In the twentieth century, Bussing notes, the child takes center stage in horror fiction as child abuse becomes the central preoccupation of the genre. Children in horror fiction are both victims and victimizers—often both at the same time. As Bussing claims, the “evil innocent” emerges in the twentieth century, “[a] perfectly amiable and tender creature which is driven to do things by forces beyond its control” that arouses both feelings of disgust and empathy at the child’s duality. Ann Douglas has also examined the centrality of the child to modern horror literature in her essay “The Dream of the Wise Child: Freud’s ‘Family Romance’ Revisited in Contemporary Narratives of Horror.” Calling the genre “family horror,” she places the novels within the context of social upheavals of the 1960s, wherein the genre hyperbolizes the generation gap as “the confusion of tongues between the adult and the child,”¹⁹ and the child becomes an uncanny creature that can “neither be escaped (they are *heimliche*) nor resolved (they are *unheimliche*).”²⁰

In both film studies and childhood studies, critics have incorporated the revolting child into larger studies of horror cinema or childhood representation, respectively. Robin

Wood, as I have mentioned, cites children as possibly the most oppressed/repressed groups informing the formation of the monster in horror cinema. Many critics of the horror genre have noted the shift in 1960s toward a genre of “family horror” (as Douglas does in literature). Kevin Heffernan cites the shift within the context of industrial practices and anxiety about the susceptibility of the child to media images. This shift, says Heffernan, was “directly connected to fear of contamination of children by both permissive childrearing practices and the products of the culture industry.”²¹ Tony Williams, in his book *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, sees the shift as potentially progressive for its attack on the familial structure, though one which is often diluted through an attribution of causality to an external (often demonic) force. In this, Williams shares common ground with Robin Wood, who similarly feels compelled to deem films either “progressive” or “conservative” for their treatment of monstrosity and their attempts at narrative closure. As I will argue, these approaches are ultimately misguided in their assumption that the pleasure of monstrous excess can be successfully contained by narrative closure, or that films can be singularly progressive or conservative based upon a structural application of narrative formations. Rather, this dissertation will continually strive towards reparative analysis, more interested in how audiences shape texts rather than the shape of texts. As an extreme ambivalence marks the horror genre in general (and the revolting child subgenre in particular), such attributions of progressive or regressive ideologies seem less like inroads to analysis and more like dead ends.

In the analysis of “family horror,” Vivian Sobchack provides a fascinating multi-genre investigation in her essay “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange.” As she argues, the horror genre, along with the science fiction and television melodrama, all began to center around the child in the 1960s. Sobchack argues that this shift towards domestic horror (and science fiction) occurs because of various social movements (women’s liberation, youth rebellion) that transformed the bourgeois family, and the patriarchal authority that underpins it, from a site of refuge to one of critique—one that must explicitly serve as the site to represent these social conflicts. Ultimately, all three genres—horror, science fiction, and melodrama—“attempt to narratively contain, work out, and in some fashion resolve the contemporary weakening of patriarchal authority... condensed and represented in the problematic figure of the child.”²² Though over-simplified in crafting the shift from child-as-victim to child-as-aggressor in film (one reason this dissertation eschews a chronological structure), Sobchack’s essay cultivates useful critical ground in understanding certain post-1960s shifts within the genre.

Some of the most useful work, however, is that which has addressed the particularity of the child monster in terms of its liminality and that state of permanent impermanence that I argue marks the child as dangerously “revolting.” Though they draw from a number of theoretical perspectives (Bakhtin, Freud, Kristeva, Douglas) and employ divergent terminology (“grotesque,” “uncanny,” “abject,” and “impure,” respectively), the preoccupation with the not-yet-becoming-ness of childhood links their work. Interestingly, they also echo the sentiments of Noel Carroll, who draws upon

Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas to argue that the horror genre as a whole is “identified with the manifestation of categorically impossible beings.”²³ Though Carroll’s theory has been heavily critiqued for its over-reliance on the monster as the site of cinematic engagement,²⁴ his model offers a useful framework for considering the specificity of the revolting child as a categorically impossible being whose horror is not physically threatening, but what Carroll calls “cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge.”²⁵

In this vein, Barbara Creed has addressed the female child monster as an extension of her work in gender and monstrosity and sees the “murderous moppets” as proto-monstrous-feminine creatures that violate societal norms of gender and threaten abjection with the liminality of their bodies.²⁶ Much of her argument turns on the notion that the female child is inherently linked to “other-worldliness,” noting a cultural history that constructs the adolescent female as susceptible, vulnerable, and possessing a barely-restrained sexuality that must be re/oppressed. Recalling her own previous work, Creed notes that “[w]hat is specifically horrific about the monstrous little woman is that the potential of her body and mind to be corrupted is seemingly without limits or borders... The mad moppet is able to ‘pass’ easily from one state of the spiritual divide to the other.... She is still a child, an innocent because she is female, and yet not fully developed, her evil potential—like her potential for innocence—is limitless” (3). The female child is thus linked to the pre-symbolic, the chora, the abject, and the wealth of attractive/repulsive power that marks the monstrous-feminine.

To date, William Paul offers the most comprehensive portrait of the revolting child and the types of anxieties and pleasures that are articulated in and through the representation. As I noted earlier, Paul views the subgenre largely as a rationale for exploring fantasies of child abuse, but he also suggests the ways in which the films mobilize contradictory pleasures as well: “the pleasure of horror that these events occasion derives from a desire to see the taboo broken at the same time that we feel the terror of the violation.”²⁷ These films, he claims, allow for the expression of repressed desires that are not sanctioned in society. In addition to fantasies of child abuse, one of these desires is to see the child be un-childlike. Of *The Bad Seed*, he says, “if we view her age as an *attraction*, we should also keep in mind that audiences must find some pleasure in imagining an eight-year-old girl capable of murder.”²⁸ Similarly, Paul notes of *The Exorcist* that the film “may be liberating in giving full vent to infantile rage at the same time that it is permeated by a sense of punitiveness toward the raging child.”²⁹ Paul’s consideration of varied and contradictory pleasures offers a useful model for engaging these texts, though in this dissertation I want to examine the ways in which the unchildlike child enables spectatorship that centralizes queerness as its mode of engagement.

Queer Viewing

In using “queerness” to describe spectatorial pleasures, I favor a more diffuse notion that is suggestive of gay or lesbian identity but is an occupiable position available to anyone with anti-heteronormative perspective. It is, likewise, a mode of engagement

that alights in moments, repulsions, and pleasures, and not in codified identitarian politics. As Judith Mayne notes, one of the distinct pleasures of the movie theater, with its relative anonymity and hyperbolic state, is as a “safe zone” in which “homosexual as well as heterosexual desires can be fantasized and acted out.”³⁰

Horror is a genre that mobilizes queer spectatorship through the elements of its formal structure: the breakdown of a social order, creatures rejected by society, the tenuous and doubtful restoration of that order, for instance. As Harry Benshoff notes in his book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, monstrosity in horror films is often figured as “a force that attempts to block [the heterosexual] romance” and as such “monster movies... might be understood as being ‘about’ the eruption of some form of queer sexuality into the midst of a resolutely heterosexual milieu.”³¹ Noting that homosexuality has been constructed alongside and through cultural notions of monstrosity, sexual anxiety, and disease, he claims that these films can both demonize (or monsterize, as he says) the villain by accessing cultural codes of queerness and also provide points of identification for queer spectators.

Horror films’ characterization of the monster-as-queer depends in large part on their categorical impossibility, to recall Carroll. In their liminality (male/female, masculine/feminine, homosocial/homoerotic) they are cognitively threatening. As Judith Butler contends, they are queer bodies that exist in the abject “unlivable and uninhabitable zones.”³² Because of this peripheral status, Benshoff claims, “the cinematic monster’s subjective position is more readily acceded to by a queer viewer—someone who already situates him/herself outside a patriarchal, heterosexist order and the popular

culture texts it produces.”³³ What I am talking about, then, is not necessarily how the text positions a spectator but rather how a text becomes *useful* to a spectator, negotiated in ways that make it pleasurable for the viewer. Many critics, from Elizabeth Ellsworth to Alexander Doty,³⁴ have noted the ways in which queer spectators make meaning from texts in provocative ways, including exploiting connotation, ignoring endings, and reconfiguring romances. In horror, queer spectators can take pleasure in the monster’s challenge to heteronormative institutions such as the family, the state, and the church.

Using this as a starting point, I want to examine how the revolting child in particular elicits queer pleasure within the narrative frame of horror. I will briefly consider three lenses through which this figuration could be seen as queer: as a failure of the developmental narrative, as an avatar of non-futurity, and as a grotesque exaggeration of normative childhood. To view the revolting child as powerful, pleasurable, or even preferable, I argue, is to partake in a very queer modality of viewing. It is to claim a spectatorial pleasure that is (in Doty’s words) “non-, anti-, or contra-straight.”³⁵

Queering Childhood

It is likely apparent from the tone of this dissertation that I have a certain affection for the texts I am engaging—a pleasure that goes beyond mere academic fascination. In my love for these films about revolting children, I find a mixture of oppositional pleasure and campy glee that is difficult for me to quantify. Indeed, the genesis of this dissertation began when I wrote a piece on *The Bad Seed* in 1996 and is in large part a personal exploration of my own perverse spectatorship. Only recently have I begun to consider the

ways in which my queerness informs my particular spectator position when engaging these films. In doing so, this work has benefited greatly by taking queer theory as its undergirding structure to engage the unspeakable elements of childhood and children's sexuality, to consider what it means when children are not properly institutionalized, and to consider the ways in which "the child" is used to police adult sexuality. But most importantly, queer theory provides a language to articulate these films' distinctive pleasures—a mode of engagement that I argue queer pleasure mobilizes.

I may begin by saying, simply, that something is very queer about childhood itself. Children are, as Patricia Holland notes, not prone to boundaries or categorical imperatives:

The bodies of young children are leaky; they do not respect established boundaries. They wet the bed, spew up their food, have no respect for tidy kitchens or hoovered carpets. They roll in mud, have uncontrollable tantrums, cover themselves in paint and bloody the hands and knees in falls and fights. Even worse, they sometimes spill out onto the streets, where their behavior is threatening and sometimes dangerous.³⁶

Their boundless potential and their unwritten-ness are sites of *both* envy and anxiety for adults; "youth," says Richard Dyer, "is a period of transition, of uncertain narrative outcome."³⁷ Queerness adheres in this notion of childhood as a liminal state—a stage understood to be a passing-through on the way to proper genitally-oriented heterosexuality. It is, as Freud notes, "polymorphously perverse" in the non-directionality and non-exclusivity of its libidinal impulses. But the notion that the child will, at some point become properly oriented creates a space in which queerness of child sexuality can be understood as innocent sexuality, unknowing sexuality, no sexuality at all. This, in turn, naturalizes heterosexuality as a predetermined destination in the developmental

narrative, and “innocence” becomes the means through which to foreclose the queerness of origins. As Jacqueline Rose notes in her seminal essay on the perverse pleasures of *Peter Pan*, “[t]he child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent, is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality—it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own.”³⁸ As reminders of our lost former selves, the child is that queer doppelganger whose mere presence evidences the mechanisms of heterosexualization. Kevin Ohi, in his article “Narrating the Child’s Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*,” provides a useful vocabulary for the queer precariousness of childhood by stating that “[t]o argue that all children are queer, then, is not to argue that all children feel same sex desire (which, for all I know they do). Rather, it is to suggest that [childhood] marks a... locus of impossibility, of murderous disidentification.”³⁹

It is then in the bad child, the ruined child, or the monstrous child that this murderous disidentification is literalized. Potent as the child is as an uncertain narrative outcome, the revolting child is exponentially troubling, as s/he seems to have no need for the entry into adulthood. The coming-of-age tale becomes horribly refigured as the already-of-age tale, as children claim libidinal territory assumed to be the solitary domain of adulthood. As such, the revolting child represents the failure of the developmental narrative, in which children successfully sublimate infantile desires and drives into the proper outlets to enter a nascent adulthood. If, as Paul Kelleher notes in “How to Do Things with Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the ‘Child in Danger’,” entire social networks have been formed around the protection and maintenance of a child’s “je ne sais

quoi,” the revolting child is the figure that ultimately names that “quoi.”⁴⁰ It is no coincidence that queers have long been regarded as similar failures of development: deemed “stunted” in their growth, “immature” in their sexuality, “tomboys” or “mama’s boys,” hedonistic and infantile in their urges, criminalized in their “arrested development,” or diagnosed with a “Peter Pan complex” because they insist on playing with tinkerbells. As Stockton says, “The grown homosexual... is fastened, one could say, to the figure of the child. The grown homosexual has often been seen metaphorically as a child. Arrested development is the official-sounding phrase that has often cropped up to describe the supposed sexual immaturity of homosexuals: their presumed status as children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own.”⁴¹ Indeed, the horror of queerness is that, in the social or juridical discourse, these men and women are still unwritten, still loitering, still failing to sublimate the desires of potentially liminal childhood. Says Leo Bersani, “heterosexual genitility is the hierarchical stabilization of sexuality’s component instincts”—that is to say, the falling-in-line of one’s own proper development so that “the perversions of adults therefore become intelligible as the sickness of uncompleted narratives.”⁴² If queerness is seen as a threat to the social fabric because queers represent the horror of incomplete narratives by their refusal to enter the social contract that marks them as “adult,” then the revolting child and the queer subject share a terrible terrain in their complete incompleteness.

William March, the queer author of the novel *The Bad Seed*, expressed in his biography an identification with his revolting child creation, Rhoda Penmark. What, then, does this have to say about the text (in book, stage, and film versions) and its obsession

with explanation and origins of monstrosity? The revolting child, like the queer, must be explained away through recourse to some developmental trauma—abuse normally. Or when that fails, some genetic abnormality is identified. Either way, the revolting child and the queer are riddles. How did they get that way? Could it have been prevented? How can we detect the signs in others? This dissertation takes as its central conceit that the revolting child, in all its various and nefarious forms, is the queer child. The child who refuses to grow up and only grows sideways lives in that space which child-rearing refuses to name but nonetheless imagines.

Fight the Future

This work will take as its framework that the axioms of *vulnerability*, *innocence*, *dependency*, and *futurity* define children's and childlike bodies—and that these qualities are seen as the terrain specifically of white childhood. Children are the receptacles for those traits that adults use to enable their own acts of definition. As such, childhood functions as a “transfer point for relations of power,”⁴³ as Foucault notes of social, political, and juridical discourses over sex and sexuality. Always invoked in and through those discourses over sexuality, children's bodies serve as the most lucrative currency in a system of discursive power that demands vulnerable bodies in need of protection from abhorrent non-normative identities. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes, “[c]hildren can simultaneously and seamlessly function as both objects and subjects of social control, since in their state of dependency it is precisely what they lack that makes them rhetorically efficacious.”⁴⁴

Recently, a number of critics have begun to engage the role of children and childhood in queer theory. Indeed, as Michael Cobb notes in a 2005 issue of *Criticism*, the interrogation of childhood by queer theory is a formative move and holds the potential to reinvigorate the field. As he says, “[t]here’s something fresh happening on this playground, perhaps because a child can stand in for almost anything . . . And it’s this elasticity, this playfulness, that helps some very smart people say some very smart things . . . Queer theory needs critical, intellectually daring and politically minded work to compete with conservative family values (especially the value of straight, innocent children).”⁴⁵ Among these are several strains of engagement: one that seeks to “queer” childhood as I have done in the previous pages and one that delineates the child as it is used in opposition to the queer, the anti-queer—both as an avatar for future and as the perpetual victim who needs saving from infection/seduction/recruitment from perversion. The latter is a mode of criticism that attempts to “uncover” the queer same-sex-desiring child in the text, what Stockton refers to as “queer ghosts.” This is the queer child who is denied speech twice: it cannot speak for itself and it is the child of which one cannot speak. The rhetorical mobility of the vulnerable child to circumscribe and punish queer sexuality breaks down at the very moment one considers queer youth *as* children. As queerness and childhood are understood culturally to be mutually exclusive notions, the mere representability of the queer child can occur only in terms of abject monstrosity. Instead, such discourse has necessitated the erasure of such bodies as nonexistent—“ghosts.” I cannot help but consider the abundant presence of forlorn spectral children—from *The Changeling* (1980) to *Silent Hill* (2006)—in terms of this desire for voice. In

these narratives, dead children from the past call out to the present to make their history known, often a brutal and violent history of rejection by parental authority. In their unending desire to be acknowledged, unearthed, and made tangible through their acknowledgment within a familial economy which so often sentenced them to eternal silence. This dissertation will take up some of this line of inquiry and consider the ways in which revolting children metaphorically actualize the young queer body by making the child speak in unspeakable ways.

Other critics, equally engaged with the muted nature of the child, have examined how the image of “childhood,” in its vulnerability, innocence, dependency, and futurity, works to limit non-normative identity formations and expressions. Lauren Berlant, for instance, has discussed the effects of a “child-safe” culture on the formation of the ideal citizen, infantilized into political submission.⁴⁶ Kelleher has noted the ways in which the child and pervert have been wedded in psychoanalytic discourse and how protection evidences the unnaturalness of the endangered (and rhetorically propitious) child. As he says, “is ‘protection’ always a belated gesture, a compensatory strategy that admits, by denying the impossibility of cure, the permanently unfinished business of normalization?”⁴⁷ Finally, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman takes up the manner in which contemporary heteronormative social policy utilizes the figure of the Child⁴⁸ to foreclose any opposition by assuming the mantle of those fighting “for” the children. In this, it manufactures an unoccupiable position for queerness, which cannot coalesce around a politics of being “against” the children, against what he calls reproductive futurism. As he says, conservative rhetoric “pose[s] an ideological limit on

political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.”⁴⁹ His polemical solution is to claim that unclaimable position, what Butler might call an “unlivable zone,” and to reject the impossibly vulnerable child and the matrices of power it upends. As he says:

Fuck the social order and Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent child on the net; fuck laws both with capital Ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.⁵⁰

Calling childhood the “fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity,”⁵¹ the force of Edelman’s argument is in advocating a queer politics that coalesces around an opposition to “reproductive futurism,” which insists on imagining a better (heterosexual, heteronormative) future “for the children.”

While I am drawn to Edelman’s political rallying call, I find his analysis of the rhetorical power of youth quite limiting. In establishing the use of the child as the anti-queer, he ignores the historical legacy of constructing Othered groups (lower class, Native Americans, African Americans, queers) *as* children and how these characterizations have been co-existent with those same minorities as being a threat to children. As a combination of these two traits, minorities are often characterized as bad children: in need of domination and in need of isolation. As Ellis Hanson notes, the domination of the sexual body by patriarchal forces is a significant thread which links the fate of both the child and the queer subject: “Children are queer,” he says. “Their sexual behavior and their sexual knowledge are subjected to an unusually intense normalizing

surveillance, discipline, and repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority.”⁵² Within the frame of a white bourgeois patriarchal culture, to be of a different gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, or religion is to be aligned with the child. Karen Sanchez-Eppler claims that “for people who are not male, or white, or American, or considered sane or sufficiently rich, exclusion from civil rights has often been implemented through analogies to the child... for these disenfranchised groups claims to agency have entailed the severing of this link, the demonstration of all the ways they are not children.”⁵³

But we also must consider, where Edelman does not, that childhood holds a rhetorical charge in the form of youthful rebellion. As social change is centrally figured in terms of generational struggle, youth becomes the locus classicus of that struggle for overthrow of oppressive authority—whether it be a new, “better” social order, or no future at all. Anarchy, too, takes the form of youth. It is no wonder that “no future” became the wryly ironic calling cards of the punk movement in Britain. Leerom Medovoi notes in *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* that the youthful “rebel” has long been the avatar of a number of emergent identity groups. As he says, “[l]iberation movements of the late sixties (black, Chicano, women’s, or gay) articulated their political subject as an *emergent* identity,” says Medovoi, “a young self rebelling and establishing its sovereignty against the forces of a racist, patriarchal, or homophobic ‘parent culture’.”⁵⁴ One need look no further than the Declaration of Independence, that most American of emancipatory documents, to see the revolution figured as the rebellion of a righteous son against the strictures of an oppressive patriarch.

If, then, reproductive futurism is predicated on the ability to “generate... generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to insure repetition,”⁵⁵ then the most queer figure is not the adult who opposes the child (as Edelman presupposes) but the child who refuses to recapitulate, who refuses to be formed, who refuses to grow up. It is that child which exposes and threatens the entire machinery of compulsory repetition. Indeed, it is the child who invades families and destroys worlds who is the greatest threat to reproductive futurism—here the future has come to consume the present. It is the child who trails not clouds of glory but harkens the apocalypse that is Edelman’s worst hope for the future. If the queer pleasure of the horror genre is to be located in its potential for rebellion and destruction of normativity and the social order, then indeed the revolting child may be its most potent metaphor.

Excess and Reception

The final queer mode of engagement is one that views the revolting child through the lens of grotesquery. As I have noted, the child is a largely unstructured polysemy, a semiotically adhesive figuration that accrues meanings based the needs of adults. It stands in for both the promise of the human progress and the nostalgia of the forgotten self. As Sanchez-Eppler notes, “[f]or adults, childhood is not only teleological, pointing towards unknown futures, but also archeological and nostalgic, recovering a lost past.”⁵⁶ She also notes that outside of our libidinal investments in children, the practice of child-rearing is fraught with complication and contradiction through the alternating imperatives

of socialization and idealization. That is to say, parents are expected to prepare the child for the adult world (socialization) while at the same time they are told to keep the child separate/remote/unchanged (idealization). The normative child, then, is expected to be both a proto-adult and a naturally innocent child. Perhaps psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it best when he says that “if the child, and stories about the child, have become our most convincing essentialism, it is perhaps because children are, as their parents always say, impossible.”⁵⁷

The impossibility of normative childhood and its incoherent contradictions alight in a turn to the monstrous. Venerable traits become vengeful, cuteness becomes creepiness, and the threatened becomes the threatening. Indeed, revolting children do not represent the antithesis of childhood or the absence of childhood traits; rather they represent the grotesque exaggeration of those traits. This is why revolting children are not singular types: they are the obscenely hyperbolic extension of everything we demand that children be to fulfill our needs of nostalgia, containment, and difference. Revolting children take the supposedly “natural” qualities of childhood and hyperbolize them to grotesque proportions. They are unnaturally intelligent and well-behaved, dangerously manipulative, eerily silent, over-imaginative and too playful, exceedingly violent and unruly, disgustingly infantile and messy, too erotic and desirous, excessively needy, or inexplicably empty.

Charting Childhood Representation

I want to summarize this approach with a working chart that maps out some of this representational terrain. As I argued early on in this introduction, this dissertation argues for the distinctiveness of the revolting child as a monstrous figuration that does not simply recapitulate in miniature the qualities of an adult counterpart. Rather, child monstrosity resides in the perceived absorbing quality of children—to learn too much, too fast, to take the lessons and the expectations too far. If we do believe that some things are the natural qualities of childhood, moderation is rarely among them. In this chart, I begin with the prized figurations of childhood—those representations that comprise nostalgic and idealized notions of childhood. These are those figurations to arrest and hold in stasis: Alice in her Wonderland, Christopher in his 100-Acre Wood, Peter in his Never-Neverland. As Rose eloquently explains, these are children who are “frozen forever before they could betray us by growing up... Alice and Peter Pan are what Holden Caulfield hopes to catch before they fall from that field of rye.”⁵⁸ I move then into the grotesque form of that figuration, where supposedly positive qualities become exaggerated in extremis and belie the repressed underpinning of this nostalgic overinvestment. I conclude by detailing the “fulcrum,” or axis, on which this shift in representation occurs—the wise child becomes the alien, for instance, when her/his knowability and transparency is removed.

By employing a taxonomy of childhood representation, I do not mean to suggest that any one figuration fits neatly into a singular category. Shirley Temple, for instance, is a wise child, seemingly advanced beyond her years both in the stylized perfection of

her cinematic personas and in the undeniable professionalism and talent witnessed in her performance as a star. She is also, however, an impish trickster character who manipulates her environment with adorable pluck and playful slight of hand and often a rebel who reveals the hypocrisy of the adult world.

Child	Fulcrum	Monster
The innocent	Knowledge	The watcher
The child of nature	Bodily control	The feral child
The dreamer	Labor/Play	The destroyer
The wise child	Transparency	The alien
The trickster	Desire	The demon

The Innocent

More sinned against than sinning, the innocent child is the most easily valued of positive childhood representations—it is that which mobilizes political agendas and that which warrants endless vigilance and protection. The allure of innocence is that it seems so very simple. We may think of Little Eva from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or the plucky love-spigot that offers unconditional love in *Annie* (1982). In their innocence, they provide an antidote to the corruption and coldness of the adult world. On its face, innocence seems natural, coherent, selfless, and tactile. But its diffuseness is evident by the unimaginability of its concrete details. Corruption, by contrast, is infinitely imaginable. This may be because corruption does, and innocence is. Innocence is a lack of traits, a

vague emptiness that had the unfortunate side-effect of always being potentially filled up with non-innocent qualities. In its grotesque form, innocence is dislocated from a Romantic notion of the sensual innocent child and aligned with the Victorian innocent—only innocent by virtue of not having, not wanting, not knowing. The grotesque Innocent is the Watcher, the vacuous child who simultaneously haunts the periphery and seems haunted itself. No doubt augmented considerably by Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the figuration finds cinematic representation in the 1961 James adaptation *The Innocents*, the eerily troubled youth of *The Other* (1972), the silent gazes of child cabals in *Who Can Kill a Child?* and *Children of the Corn*, or the silence of the child vampire in *Interview with a Vampire* (1994). What separates these children from their more prized siblings is that underneath the silence and seeming unwantingness is the site of a harbored desire or malicious intent. As Bussing says of the "silent watcher," the viewer cannot help but wonder "if the steady look of the child's huge eyes is not further a sign of an unspeakable secret, an expression of evil experience; and if the little observer really conceals something dreadful, it is therefore infinitely superior to its adult environment. Knowledge of evil is doubly incongruous for someone who is hardly supposed to have any knowledge at all."⁵⁹

The Child of Nature

As the Romantic's child was an agent of nature, the child was in many ways sacred, or sacralized as having an intimate (and for adults, lost) connection to the natural world. Even the "child of nature" from Aveyron represented a window into a lost past

whereby men believed they could trace the evolution of the species through the discovered child's body. Children and nature continue to have an intimate connection in the popular imaginary as protectors of the planet in cartoons like *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (1990) or films like 2003's eco-fable *Holes*. When not specifically eco-critical, children are often empowered in elemental ways, from the singular ability to communicate with animals to the arcane magic of the *Harry Potter* children. In its grotesque form, this connection between the child and nature becomes manifest in its other-worldly terror. The child's body serves as a gateway for evil forces from the beyond, as in *The Exorcist* or *Poltergeist*. Alternately, the child's ability to commune with nature becomes monstrous: the subgenre is littered with films in which children call upon beasts and monsters to do their bidding, including rats (*Ben* [1972]), insects (*Phenomena* [1985] and *Kiss of the Tarantula* [1976]), snakes (*Jennifer the Snake Goddess* [1978]), subterranean monsters (*The Pit* [1981]), and zombies (*The Child* [1977]), to name a few. Most importantly, the child of nature becomes the feral child when it turns on the notion of bodily control. Regan McNeil in *The Exorcist* is feral and frightening because she cannot (or will not) control herself. Besides becoming wildly animated, she also loses control of her bodily functions, urinating and vomiting as one might expect from an infant—or, indeed, animal. If the Child of Nature is a regression to an earlier state—one that is viewed as more pure and untainted, then the Feral Child is a reminder that nature is wild and untamed, violent and survivalist.

The Dreamer

The Dreamer draws upon that prized quality of imaginativeness of youth, and a seemingly endless capacity for creation. In childish wonder, the Dreamer has not been tempered (or tampered) by the cynicism of adulthood, which kills the capacity to become lost in fanciful abandon. Films such as *Hook* (1991), in its reauthoring of the Peter Pan narrative, animates the desire of adults to return to the possibilities of youth and the dreamscapes that once were visited there. The Dreamer is prized, too, in her/his ability to imagine alternative spaces of utopian freedom, a space that allows for escape from the horrors of the material world. The young protagonists of *A Bridge to Terabithia* (2007) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) utilize their imagination as coping mechanisms to transform the trauma of their “reality” while the young transgendered boy at the center of *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) manufactures a Technicolor dream world in which he lives out his Barbie-like fantasies of gender mobility. In the horror genre, however, the child’s capacity for imagination is monstrous in its boundless capacity. Children are continually without limits or restrictions, and their imaginations craft worlds that the adult eye cannot see—an impasse that sets children apart in their secret world. In the adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s story “The Veldt” in the film *The Illustrated Man* (1969), parents find that the children’s savage imaginary land is actually real, and their desires—to release it upon their parents—are equally as savage. The division between the child’s imaginary world and the spirit world is a tenuous distinction in horror, as imaginary friends so often turn out to be malevolent spirits (*The Curse of the Cat People*, *The Innocents*, *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *Devil’s Backbone*, *The Orphanage*). At its worst, the Dreamer becomes the

Destroyer—lost in a fantasy world and unable to distinguish between reality and fiction, as is the case with *Heavenly Creatures* (1997). Or the child may be empowered to a grotesque degree, as in the seminal *Twilight Zone* episode “It’s a Good Life” (1961) in which a six-year-old boy holds a town hostage for fear of displeasing a boy with godlike powers. The Destroyer distinguishes itself from the dreamer in that it makes no distinctions between play and labor. For the Destroyer, production is play, but so is annihilation. Again and again, the revolting child is shown to be monstrous in this genre by its dislocation of play from the register of creation to that of death and destruction.

The Wise Child

The child prodigy is a prized figure in the normative conception of childhood—s/he evidences an evolutionary progression of the species, the success of early educational interventions, or the promise of an in-utero soundtrack featuring Mozart. In the comedy *Parenthood* (1989), Gil (Steve Martin) cringes as his child prodigy niece performs her multiplication tables while Gil’s child plays with a bucket on the lawn. The Wise Child is the transcendent child and seems to have sprung fully-formed and fully-knowing. In the writings of psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi, he describes the adult dream fantasy of a baby with glasses who educates adults from the site of pre-corrupted and pure innocence. The wise child’s innocence is held in check, however, by a seeming lack of any desire. Miniature adults, they are the antithesis of the Child of Nature, and yet they too shame adult culture, which is here too passionate and too petty. As such, they are useful avatars of anti-war efforts. One of the most dynamic uses of the Wise Child is in

Jack Arnold's *The Space Children* (1958), a Cold War fable in which a group of youths band together to aid an alien in avoiding nuclear war. In its more innocuous form, the Wise Child is "precocious," as is the case in *Jerry McGuire* (1993)—a stockpile of unusual information or unusually probing questions. But the Wise Child is, ultimately, knowable. His/her desires, if they exist, are coexistent with the state or the betterment of humanity. S/he is the ideal recipient of futurity. The Wise Child turns monstrous when s/he is no longer transparent, when her/his motives are unclear, or when the control of the world becomes not an inheritance but an invasion. Indeed, the grotesque version of the Wise Child is the Alien, inhuman and unknowable, foreign and opaque. This figuration finds its apotheosis in the eerily logical Midwich children from *Village of the Damned* but can similarly be found in those children whose perfection marks them as too adultlike to be perceived as natural. And yet this characteristic already instilled and inculcated upon children serves to animate this figuration. Rhoda Penmark, for instance, or her updated counterpart Henry Evans in *The Good Son* (1993), also evidences this unknowability, carried into a sociopathic register that makes the Wise Child's opacity all the more threatening.

The Trickster

This character could also be thought of as "the imp," with its diminutive devilishness. The Trickster is an archetypal figure who is viewed alternately as an innocuous troublemaker or a progressive agent who inverts social order. The child as Trickster is a consistent trope in literature and film from Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to

The Little Rascals to Bart Simpson in *The Simpsons*. The child's laughter is a mark of the Trickster's play; it is social-upheaval-as-play. In Shirley Temple's body of work, she is consistently a rule-breaker, pointing out the hypocrisy of the structured, logical world with her flights of fancy and nullifying cuteness. She moves freely between adult and child worlds, and her trickery, though based in deceit, is ultimately recuperable because it seeks to unify institutional forces like family and nation. In other texts, such as *The Parent Trap* (1961, 1998), the Trickster—or in this case, twin tricksters—are similarly at the service of reuniting the broken family unit, and so their social upheaval and play is seen as adorably manipulative. The Trickster also finds figuration in Kevin from the *Home Alone* (1993) series, whose abandonment and bodily endangerment by intruders is inoculated by the structure of the genre and its cartoonish violence and the deft skill with which Kevin is able to employ trickery to invert power relations. The exaggerated form of the Trickster, then, is the Demon. The Demon is no less than the “imp” writ large. It finds its literal figuration in Regan McNeil from *The Exorcist*, who not only “mixes truth with lies” to deceive and devastate her adversaries but also plumbs the recesses of her victims' unconscious, uncovering their repressed desires. Indeed, the demonic form of the Trickster turns on desire. More than just an agent of the state, the Demon wishes and wants for his/her own. Avarice and hedonism mobilize the Demon's trickery, as Rhoda is willing to murder to acquire the penmanship medal she desires. The Demon is not recuperable by the status quo because s/he wants what a child should not desire, and the Demon's trickery offers no promise of a return to order.

Children's Camp

It is in these formations of excessive modes of “childness” that I can locate inroads to yet another form of queer engagement with the revolting child. One may suppose that, as horror texts, one of the most salient terrors of the revolting child (from a reception standpoint) is the possibility that any child could be a “bad seed.” Some revolting children are born, some revolting children are made, however entire industries have been built around the creation and cultivation of parental anxiety. In the last century, the grounding metaphor for the child has shifted; the child is no longer a blank slate or a ball of clay—a malleable object to be molded by behaviorist intervention. Instead, the child today is more like an egg: fragile, delicate, and endangered at every turn by minor missteps that will develop into major traumas as the child matures. If horror is the dominant mode of reading these films, then the dominant reading position should be understood as parental—either literally, or in a manner that mobilizes the generational gap to elicit terror. To be terrified by the child’s uncategorical violation of the expectations of childhood is to take the place of the parent, the present, and the patriarchy against the monstrous child, the impending future, and the revolt of youth.

Now whether anyone actually occupies this position, wholly or temporarily, is an unanswered question. Let me suggest, however, that an oppositional reading strategy locates the grotesque exaggeration of childhood as a site of engagement with the films not as horror, but comedy. Indeed, for those who consider themselves outside of a compulsory reproductive economy, such anxieties are misplaced or even funny. Specifically, I want to think about how a queer reading of these films, enabled by their

excess, works within the mode of camp. Indeed, literary critic Leslie Fielder has noted the camp potential of horror, stating that “the Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness.”⁶⁰

As Jack Babuscio notes in “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” “[t]he horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to camp interpretation” as the films often “make the most of stylish conventions for expressing instant feeling, thrills, sharply defined personality, outrageous and ‘unacceptable’ sentiments, and so on. In addition, the psychological issues stated or implied... must relate in some significant aspect of our situation and experience” (i.e., “the masking of ‘abnormality’ behind a façade of ‘normality’” and “personal rebellion against enforced restrictions”).⁶¹ Brett Farmer reiterates this sentiment by noting that “gay camp venerates horror films, which have long been recognized as a privileged cinematic site for the representation of grotesque femininity.”⁶² As I will demonstrate in upcoming chapters, a similar veneration has been attributed to grotesque childhood, as evidenced by the “camping” of figures such as Regan McNeil, Rhoda Penmark, or Carrie White. This can be understood as a particular mode of queer engagement with the text, one that finds commonality with the revolting child as a similarly stunted heteronormative development, and one which also finds a strong disassociation with the beleaguered parental protagonists, ensconced as they are within the restraints of compulsory reproduction.

Rather than saying that queer readers (of which I include myself) have found a way to squeeze blood from a cinematic turnip, it is important to note the ways in which the texts enable their own queer readings. If queer reading is simply a reading strategy

and a repurposing of texts not intended for queer use, then queer reading will always be, as Alexander Doty says, “‘alternative’ readings, wishful or willful readings, or ‘reading too much into things’ readings.” Rather, the more dynamic claim may be to reject the minoritizing position and to say no, my reading is in the text. Queer readings, says Doty, “result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture and their audiences all along.”⁶³

Methodology

The dissertation will allow close reading of cinematic texts to be its foundation. In doing so, it will engage textual analysis from a structuralist perspective—pulling out recurring tropes, images, binaries, and narrative structures for analysis. As such, the organizing mode of this piece will be according to the taxonomy of childhood representations rather than a chronological survey of revolting child films. Since, as Jenkins argues, “[w]e do not so much discard old conceptions of the child as accrue additional meanings around what remains one of our most culturally potent signifiers,”⁶⁴ such a structure allows for an examination of how certain figurations (i.e., “the collective,” “the possessed child”) interact with past formations and historical contingencies which shape representation. In the interest of managing the expansiveness of the subject, this dissertation will utilize one or two key texts per chapter as representative examples to stand in for a larger body of representation. Each chapter will attend to both the origins of a particular figuration as well as its most salient example. Some texts, such as *Village of the Damned*, form the basis for a number of recurring

tropes, including the supernaturally powerful child, the changeling narrative, and the child as collective, and will be addressed in brief from multiple frameworks. In cases where the seminal text created a number of imitators, as is the case with *The Exorcist*, additional texts will be referenced only as their differences serve to nuance or complicate the central argument. In the interest of containing an expansive subject, this dissertation will limit itself to Western notions of childhood, and the representations contained therein. Further, almost all of the films analyzed are strictly American productions, with a few notable exceptions, such as *Village of the Damned* (an American/British joint production) and *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1978) from Spain. In these cases, my interest lies more in how these films establish conventions that contribute to the increasingly varied and fecund representation of revolting childhood.

This dissertation takes spectatorship to be a varied, fluid, and often unruly affair. This is especially true of the horror film, which offers multiple sites and forms of pleasure, whether they be directed, oppositional or some combination of either. Following the work of Elizabeth Cowie in “Fantasia,” this dissertation will argue that the cinema of the revolting child provides the phantasmogoric space wherein the child is being beaten, the child is beating, the spectator is the child, the spectator is the abuser, and the spectator is the dislocated subject. To simply suggest, then, that the revolting child presents a point of identification for the queer spectator to adopt is to oversimplify the multivalent pleasures the texts. Indeed, though the revolting child may be up for adoption, no one wants to keep them. Rather, I claim these films present a *mise-en-scene* of desire, a fantasy space to circumnavigate emotive experiences of queerness:

repression, desire, rage, alienation, revolt, and community, to name a few. The films, their preoccupations, and their anxieties constitute a mise-en-scene of desire that comfortably accommodates queer subjectivity. In *The Bad Seed*, for instance, masking and masquerade serve as the thematic point of identification.

Like many works that employ queer theory, this dissertation is theoretically promiscuous: it will flirt with many bodies of theory but ultimately not be married to any of them. This critical non-monogamy is useful in examining a figuration that touches so many areas, and this dissertation will scavenge theoretically to provide a multidimensional portrait. Often, the text itself will dictate its theoretical approach: *The Bad Seed* involves a discussion of performativity and intersections of race and childhood, *The Exorcist* is better viewed through the lens of abjection and excess, and *Children of the Corn* through the deployment of Foucauldian examinations of power and surveillance. I imagine the dissertation's collection of theory as a fascinating dinner party, where seemingly disparate guests (some theoretical giants, other not considered critics at all) are seated next to one another and placed in conversation. What would Maria Montessori say to Michael Warner? Judith Butler to Fredric Wertham? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to Margaret Mead? D.W. Winnicott to Julia Kristeva? This dissertation is especially interested in placing childhood studies and queer theory in conversation, as assumptions over the simultaneous asexuality and heterosexuality of children have tended to bar critical intercourse.

What assuredly links the chapters in this dissertation is an overarching perspective grounded in queer theory and an abiding interest in the multivalent web of discourse

around the figuration of the revolting child. As such, discourse analysis will also underpin much of this dissertation—I engage the extratextual elements of several films, including marketing, critical reception, fan activity, news media reports, and industry documents. In doing so, this dissertation will analyze the cinematic revolting child within a broad range of varied negotiations and practices. Much of this work will be archival; I follow Nicholas Sammond’s book *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960* as an ambitious model for the type of multivalent work this dissertation intends. The case study of *The Bad Seed*, for instance, involves both historical documents from the time of the film’s release and contemporary advertisements and interviews that elucidate the continuing practice of interpretation and textual renegotiation. The case study of *The Exorcist*, however, will draw upon mainstream media reports and fan discourse, which evidence a multivalent approach to the film’s identificatory offerings.

Chapters

In chapter one, “Sugar and Spice and Everything Vice: The Terrible Performativity of Childhood,” I engage in a close reading of the originary “revolting child” text, *The Bad Seed*, and its extra-textual discourse. In *The Bad Seed*, a young girl named Rhoda is slowly revealed to be a sociopath and commits several murders by the narrative’s close. More horrific than her crimes, however, is that she is able to escape suspicion by performing innocence so convincingly that even her mother remains in doubt as to her “actual” monstrosity. As a progenitor, this film is notable for its

categorization within the genre of family melodrama rather than horror. As such, it exists as a horrific hyperbolization of the mother/daughter tensions in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and is a film that predicts the formation (and, in fact, the narrative) of *The Exorcist* (1973) and the “family horror” film of the late 1960s. I will examine *The Bad Seed*’s portrayal of Rhoda’s opaque, unknowable nature as symptomatic of the 1950s confusion and anxiety over child-rearing practices, juvenile delinquency, and the particular nature of child psychology. More sinister yet is the text’s articulation of childhood innocence as a performable aesthetic that has little connection to actual, “natural” childhood innocence. That Hays Code censors sought to detract from the appeal of Rhoda by instituting a moralistic ending further underlines the degree to which the film offers more than simply pedophobic pleasures.

The chapter will close with an examination of the text’s afterlife as a piece of camp and how queer communities have engaged the film’s supposed terrors with equal degrees of titillation and satire. In particular, Sadie Benning’s short “It Wasn’t Love” (1992) in which she sets an affectionate mother/daughter scene from the film against Prince’s “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” is a queer renegotiation of the text that brings to light the film’s disavowed familial erotic subtext. This chapter will also engage the figure of Wednesday Addams (in various media, but largely the 1990s camp films) as a queer reception/reauthoring of Rhoda as an iconographic queer figure. Additionally, I will engage the numerous queer/camp restagings of the theatrical version of *The Bad Seed* as a means of articulating how heteronormative anxieties coalesced around the child can be

“camped” within queer reception practices and how the revolting child can become an avatar of an anti-heteronormative social praxis.

In chapter two, “Demons are a Girl’s Best Friend: Possession as Transgression,” I examine the “bodily possession” cycle of revolting child cinema which centers on the danger and liminality of the female adolescent body. The figuration finds its template in the sexualized adolescent body of Regan McNeil (Linda Blair) in *The Exorcist*, though this chapter will address a number of imitative texts such as *To The Devil a Daughter* (1975). This chapter focuses on the star image of Blair as a means of rereading the film text and examines the way in which Blair’s body served as a transfer point for anxieties about childhood, queerness, exploitation, pedophilia, and the film industry.

Extratextually, critics elided character and role to ask whether the young actress had been damaged—her body, her innocence, and heterosexuality all endangered by the film.

Mainstream magazines recuperated Blair, telling readers that she was unharmed and ignorant of the words she spoke. Others “exorcize[d] the demon” out of Blair by giving her a feminine makeover. As I argue, these responses to Blair’s “endangerment” in fact re-enact the very narrative of the film by rescuing her abjection, perversity, and queerness. At the same time, however, fan magazines spoke to an active, perverse, and even queer spectatorship that canonized Blair as transgressive figure. As opposed to mainstream obsession with recuperation and normalization, fans found pleasure in Blair’s perverse star persona, eroticizing and identifying with it. They also reveled in Blair’s legal trouble, calling her “devilish” for her latest drug “possession.” They even offered their young female readers “foxy Linda Blair and *Exorcist* pix.” A reading of the text

from “outside” in, this chapter takes these fan pleasures to “reread” the film’s multiple sites of pleasure. Indeed, the text enables its own perverse reading which inverts the film from a narrative of rescue from the demonic to one of revenge against (hetero)normative forces. In this way, the film shares vindictive terrain with Carrie (as noted by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*).⁶⁵

Chapter three, “Raising Hell: Parental Rejection and the Possibility of Gay Adoption,” examines a series of revolting child films in which Freud’s family romance plot is inverted, and parents unwittingly discover that the child in their custody is not their own. Instead, the family has been invaded by a foreign body through metaphysical, medical, or extraterrestrial means, and parents must weigh their paternal obligation against their desire for self-preservation. These films generally fall into two categories, which I am calling a “paternal” and “maternal gothic.” In the paternal gothic, the discovery of the alien child is made post-utero, and the crisis is centered on the father’s encroaching doubt over the validity of his lineage. In this chapter, I begin with *Village of the Damned* as the figuration’s progenitor and then segue into a reading of *The Omen* (1975-1981) series. In both of these films, the horror is decidedly Oedipal, as each involves a son who must destroy his father so as to assume the mantle of world domination. Interestingly, both involve a mother who, though she gave birth to the son in question, is immediately evacuated from the narrative, either through death or disinterest. The paternal gothic is about the encroachment of the Oedipal, though interestingly *The Omen* stages this in queer terms. To assume the mantle of the anti-Christ is indeed to

submit to the patriarchal developmental narrative. To refuse that right, as Damien attempts, is to align himself with queerness.

In the maternal gothic, perhaps epitomized by *Rosemary's Baby*, the invasion centers on the pre-natal stage and the horror of an independent alien organism growing inside of the female body. In this cycle, the teratological horror is directed at the womb as a site of monstrous gestation, as the spectre of reproductive rights remaps the female body as a contested terrain. Other examples, such as *Demon Seed* (1977) or *The Unborn* (1974), figure the scene of childbirth as the moment of monstrous emergence and often represent the paternal scientist as child protector. The mother, instead, must choose to welcome or abort the monstrosity in her womb. This chapter will analyze these films against the non-horror film *The Twilight of the Golds* (1997), which discursively mimics the maternal gothic in dramatizing a heterosexual couple's proposed abortion of their unborn gay child.

Picking up a suggestion from Paul, I argue that these films provide an end-run around the social taboo against child abuse by making the child a foreign entity endangering the true, cohesive home (the womb so often figured as a child's first "home"). Additionally, they often endanger the true, natural children of the family as part of their path towards world domination. They are entirely alien, without even the conceit of possession to give them claim to the abuse taboo. As such, the films manufacture the central distinctive pleasure of the changeling narrative as the spectacle of seeing a child potentially beaten or destroyed. However, this chapter argues that these films require an investment in the parental/heterosexual/reproductive economy to achieve the impact of

horror. The resonance of the changeling narrative for queer readers, whose sexuality places them outside of a compulsory reproductive economy, is rather that it provides an apt metaphor for feeling alienated within the family. This chapter will read the changeling films against the coming out memoirs of adult queer subject, including the biography of *The Bad Seed* author William March, to re-read the films as a pleasurable renegotiation of queer childhood alienation.

Finally, in chapter four, “It Takes a Child to Raze a Village: Demonizing Youth Rebellion,” the dissertation examines those films in which the revolting child becomes pluralized. *Village of the Damned* is traced again as the origin of this figuration, but the majority of the chapter will focus its more modern manifestations: *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1975), a largely unaddressed horror film; *The Children* (1980); and *Children of the Corn* (1984). This chapter examines how youth rebellion is invoked and how child/adult relations are inverted, particularly in terms of power and surveillance. Indeed, the films can be read as monstrous invocations of generation gap and the fear that the world held in store for the next generation will be taken by force before its due. In these films, adults are continually infantilized, placed in a terrain in which they have no control over their own destinies, and they must endure a Frankensteinian retribution from a younger generation that holds them accountable for their own monstrous manufacture. While trafficking in the pervasive anxiety about juvenile delinquency and the danger of idle youths in groups, these films also carry a legacy of anxiety about child rearing practices believed to be practiced by the enemy during the Cold War. In these films, the children live in non-hierarchical structures, move discreetly and indistinctly, and communicate

with a hive mind, sharing a secret language all their own. Rather than situating children as innocent victims susceptible to outside invasion, the films construct a nightmare scenario in which children are always already corrupted by the dissolution of national and political boundaries. In this world, adults are infantilized silent witnesses to their own imminent destruction as the future (and the imperative of futurity) consumes the present. As such, the revolt of children against an oppressive parental culture—a fantasy of community formation and social upheaval—has a pronounced relevance for any infantilized minority. This chapter will thus conclude with an examination of similar anxieties that have characterized the coalescing and mobilization of queer movements, in particular the anxiety about contagion, corruption, and an alternative system of non-biological kinship.

I conclude in “Afterthoughts: Fear of a Queer Playground,” a reference to Michael Warner’s indispensable *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. In this conclusion, I ask what the revolting child, as a challenge to the cultural logic of development and futurity, could mean for a queer social praxis. I directly address Edelman’s call for an anti-child queer politics which takes the place of the social order’s death drive and, drawing upon the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jose Esteban Muñoz, I ask if the revolting child offers hope for something more than “no future,” but rather for a queerly radical alterity.

Sugar and Spice and Everything Vice: The Terrible Performativity of Childhood

Of course, through all these shining performances I was feeling less than entirely adequate... But it was a more than that: it was the basic understanding—that sick, guilty feeling in the deepest recesses of my psyche—that I was a phony. I was not the best little boy in the world as my parents thought.

-- John Reid, *The Best Little Boy in the World*¹

In 1973, Andrew Tobias (writing under the pseudonym John Reid) published *The Best Little Boy in the World*, a personal memoir of his childhood and self-discovery as a gay man. Written in a series of present-tense vignettes, Tobias reanimates his childhood experiences in both child's voice and adult self-reflection. "I am five years old. I am the best little boy in the world, told so day after day" explains the author.² As if replaying home movies from his childhood, Tobias provides brief glimpses into his formative experiences—both the creation of an inward identity and an outward mask that he presented to the world. In many ways, the memoir is less a story of a gay man emerging from the closet and more a meditation on how the closet is constructed—how queers, as children, learn to play pretend. "I am in the hall closet, behind the winter coats, stiflingly hot," remembers Tobias, "but this is the price you pay to win at hide-and-seek."³ Indeed, as Tobias notes, in this hide-and-no-seek game, "masking" is an essential feature of queer submergence, of being-but-not-seeming. His is a narrative of loss—not the loss of

innocence, which is the narrative most often told about childhood. Rather, Tobias narrates the loss of self behind a façade of innocence and ignorance: the construction of a false exterior self that recapitulates societal expectations of normative childhood. Inside, however, Tobias's remembered or reimagined child-self harbors inappropriate knowledge seemingly incompatible with the body of a child.

I start here with Tobias's memoir because the focus of this chapter, the 1956 domestic horror film *The Bad Seed*, is equally obsessed with performance, masking, and the covertness of cuteness. Its eponymous infantile monster, Rhoda Penmark, hides a wealth of perverse desires beneath her Pollyannaish veneer. Through her "shining performances," as Tobias might put it, she plays the Best Little Girl in the World with cunning accuracy. Considerations of presence, performance, and power collide in *The Bad Seed*, as inquiry into the curious reception and afterlife of this text raise questions about the revolting child and the presumed naturalness of childhood innocence. It is no mere coincidence that queer communities have embraced *The Bad Seed*. Indeed, the film contains its own utility as queer camp through its central ruminations on masking, performance, and its deconstruction of the "naturalness" of normative white childhood innocence. These narrative preoccupations provide a constellation of queer engagement founded in both emotional trauma and animistic fantasy. The camp reinterpretations that would follow in texts as varied as the films of Sadie Benning, drag stage performances, 1960s television, and 1990s film comedies play upon comedic potential of childhood perversion plumbed for horror with the proto-family horror film. *The Bad Seed* employs the rhetoric of excess to fashion a perversely liminal childhood figuration that manages to

be both horrific and campy in Rhoda's grotesquery. For its audience, I consider what types of pleasure the perverse spectator of *The Bad Seed* may find in the masked child who appropriates normative childhood innocence to subvert the family. Indeed, what is the satisfaction of seeing concealment and "closeted-ness" as a site of power?

The Bad Seed was based on a 1954 novel of the same name by author William March. A critical and financial success, the novel was quickly translated into a theatrical version and, a few years later, a film version. In the film, eight-year-old Rhoda (Patty McCormack)⁴ has surreptitiously convinced almost all those around her that she is the perfect little angel. But underneath the surface is a cold and calculated killer who murders a classmate, Claude Daigle, for a penmanship medal she deemed as rightfully hers. Before the close of the film, the audience discovers that she has additionally killed an old lady who promised her a snow globe and a hired hand who threatened to expose her and that she is actively plotting the murder of her upstairs neighbor Monica Breedlove (Evelyn Varden). Her mother, Christine Penmark (Nancy Kelly), learns of Rhoda's proclivities while her husband Kenneth (William Hopper) is away on military business and finds herself torn between her maternal instincts to protect her child from the authorities and her own terror at her child's monstrous nature. As if prompted by Rhoda's unnatural nature, Christine delves into her own past, discovering that she is the daughter of a female serial killer and has seemingly passed on the "bad seed" to her daughter. Out of guilt, Christine gives Rhoda an overdose of sleeping pills and shoots herself in the head, only to have both she and her daughter survive. The film ends, however, with

Rhoda being struck by lightning at the pier, the site where she once murdered her classmate.

Though it enjoyed an incredibly successful run on the stage, most producers in Hollywood considered *The Bad Seed* to be an unadaptable property for the screen. When finally approved by the PCA (Production Code Authority), the plot remained largely intact, with a few notable alterations. To pacify censors, screenwriter John Lee Mahin and director Mervin LeRoy made two major alterations to the script, both of which were intended to curtail any possible identification with Rhoda and to clarify the film's moral standing on her crimes. I will take up these alterations later in this chapter as I engage with the spectatorship and curious afterlife of the film.

Concealment and Developmental Stasis

Taking *concealment* as the film's central occupation and conceit, this chapter explores the vicissitudes of masking for the text and its queer spectators. As I have noted earlier, this dissertation takes spectatorship to be a varied, fluid, and often unruly affair. This is especially true of the horror film, which offers multiple sites and forms of pleasure, whether they be dominant, oppositional, or some combination of either. The cinema of revolting childhood animates desires within a range of pedaphobic and protectionist impulses. It is that space wherein a child is literally being beaten, but a child is also beating. To suggest, then, that the revolting child presents a point of identification for the queer spectator to adopt is to oversimplify the multivalent pleasures the texts. Indeed, though the revolting child may be up for adoption, no one wants to keep a brat

for very long. Recalling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I would call this a type of avuncular identification⁵—with the child and dislocated from the child—not parental but related, pluripositioned, kept at a distance.

Following Elizabeth Cowie’s model of spectatorship in “Fantasia,” I claim these films present a *mise-en-scène* of desire,⁶ a fantasy space to circumnavigate emotive experiences of queerness: repression, desire, rage, alienation, revolt, and community, to name a few. As Jack Babuscio notes of queer reception practices and horror cinema,

The horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to camp interpretation... the psychological issues stated or implied, along with the sources of horror, must relate in some significant aspect of our situation and experience; e.g. the inner drives which threaten the individual’s well-being and way of life... coping with pressures to conform and adapt... the masking of “abnormality” behind a façade of “normality”... personal rebellion against enforced restrictions.⁷

This is especially true of monstrous child films, with sympathetic antagonists so often depicted as abjected bodies, both troubled and troublesome, incompatible with the normative family structure. These films, their preoccupations, and their anxieties constitute a *mise-en-scène* of desire that comfortably accommodates queer subjectivity. In *The Bad Seed*, and other films that centralize the perfectly performing child, masking and masquerade serve as emotive sites of focalization.

As I mentioned in the preamble of this dissertation, I prefer a theoretically promiscuous approach to this subject, and as such I will draw upon a number of rhetorical constructions of “masking” (masquerade, performance, the closet, innuendo, etc) and draw together varied approaches to masking in critical and developmental literature. In race theory, the concept of “masking” appears as early as 1903 to describe the particularity of black experience within a white hegemonic power structure. In *The Souls*

of *Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois uses the veil to describe a double consciousness of Otherness—negotiating between one’s self-perception and “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁸ However, DuBois (and Frantz Fanon more forcefully much later) also suggests a manner in which the veil troubles a racial power structure that demands the full exhibition of the self.

With gender as her focus in 1929, Joan Riviere explored the notion of “Womanliness as Masquerade,”⁹ in which a mask of femininity serves as a prophylactic against male aggression and reprisal. Like Du Bois’s double consciousness, Riviera argues that intellectual or professional women may dislocate themselves from their “identity” and outwardly perform an exaggerated femininity that is perceived as less threatening to patriarchal power. Judith Butler would also examine gender and performance when she wrote *Gender Trouble* in 1990.¹⁰ In this influential work, Butler uses “performativity” to describe the unconscious performance of normative gender formations. Most important for this work is Butler’s assertion that gender is a ritualized reiteration of norms for which there is no original. As copies of copies of copies, masculinity/femininity can have no uninterrogated links to male/female bodies: the naturalness of gender linkage to sex is a fiction. For Butler, gay male drag offers a visible marker of the artificiality of gender—a conscious performance that mocks naturalness through the exaggeration of camp.

A valuable analog to Riviera’s work is that she based her theory in part around Sandor Ferenczi’s research that claims that gay men utilize exaggerated performances of hegemonic masculinity to fortify against suspicions of queerness. Indeed, queerness has

repeatedly relied upon the metaphor of masking to convey the experience of passing within a heterosexual world, most succinctly in the notion of “the closet.” Moreover, though, queerness troubles the tacitly confederate connection among sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Camp, as a queer production and reception strategy, often playfully critiques normative identity (most succinctly, gender) through exaggerated performance. In short, it transforms the assumedly natural and embodied into something artificial—a mask—which can be assumed and removed.

On the connection between queerness and camp, Richard Dyer has noted that queers “find it easy to appear to fit in, we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, and forms and appearances of different social circles. And why? Because we’ve had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be part of the crowd, the same as everyone else... So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, form: style.”¹¹ As Dyer notes, this propensity for disguise and masquerade is something that is cultivated (one could argue, even as a child).

If masquerade is the practice, then camp is the theory. Camp is the interpretative framework of survival in a repressive society that deems queer desire abnormal and necessitates its masked disavowal. Through the lens of camp, what Susan Sontag once described as “[b]eing-as-playing a Role... the metaphor of life as theatre,”¹² everyone is masked, everyone is playing a role. Michael Bronski has gone so far as to call the denaturalization of gender as performance as “an essential part of gay male living.”¹³

This chapter will seem to proceed with analogs. It is significant to note that Roy S. Simmons, biographer of *The Bad Seed* author William March, described him as a

deeply closeted homosexual. Indeed, as Simmons and critic Ellen Showalter have noted, March imbued many of his novels with discussions of homosexuality that wrestled with contemporaneous debates over queer ontology.¹⁴ In *The Bad Seed*, Monica describes her brother Emory's "larvated homosexuality." When Emory asks what "larvated" means, Monica replies, "It means covered, as with a mask. It means concealed."¹⁵ The term itself is tellingly visceral and repulsive—it conjures images of a formless being with boundless potential for becoming. The larvated stage conceals its future self in transient grotesquery. Its dangerous quality lies in the indeterminacy of future, and tellingly the term "larva" comes from the Latin for an "evil spirit" or "demon." March's work is heavily populated with these larvated characters—like Rhoda, like the author himself.

The cinema of the revolting child is also a fecund site of larvation. Of course all children are, in a sense, larval—what they will be remains to be seen. Troubling characteristics not acceptable within adult culture, in particular nonnormative gender or sexuality, are given latitude within the geography of childhood because they are understood to be "phases" out of which the child will eventually grow. Fear is kept at bay (so the story goes) through recourse to the child's ignorance or natural innocence, a rhetorical cocoon that insulates them from suspicion. Revolting children often have a veneer of innocence to protect them: not an ignorance enforced and inculcated upon them, but a knowing performance of cultural norms—they outwardly bear the mask of seamliness to avoid suspicion. Growing sideways and not "up" into normativity, they are also developmentally larval, locked in that state of developmental suspension that I argue

is central to their horror. Larvated, both the queer and the revolting child horrify in their petrified transitionality—they refuse to develop.

Finally, the notion of masking and performance has cache within the domain of childhood and developmental theory as well. For many clinicians, particularly those followers of Jean Piaget, children were to be studied as separate and distinct beings, not simply adults in tiny bodies. As such, an emphasis was placed upon the “natural” state of child cognition and behavior. In *The Secret of Childhood*, physician and educator Maria Montessori found the performing child to be a particular impediment to her child-centered, exploratory method of pedagogy. She warned against encouraging or allowing children to internalize and outwardly perform adult expectations—to be, for instance, the Best Little Boy in the World—as it was incompatible with self-directed learning. Montessori believed in a messy, unmasked, “natural” childhood that could be observed and directed as needed. Patricia Holland has noted that Montessori believed it essential that children “make themselves available to the professional eye, and... reveal themselves without artifice, forgoing any temptation to adopt what Montessori described as a ‘mask of seamliness,’ or indeed any other mask.”¹⁶ Indeed, “seamliness” is etymologically thick with masquerade—to be “seemly” is to wear a mask of social conformity—something expected of adults, but seen as incompatible with the natural body of a child. For Montessori, the larvated child—seemly and staged—poses a problem. For the cinema of monstrous childhood and *The Bad Seed* in particular, the larvated child poses a threat.

One final note on persistence of masking for this chapter, more serendipitous than substantive: the epitaph for this chapter comes from Andrew Tobias, the author of *The Best Little Boy in the World*. In its initial publication, Tobias chose a pseudonym for himself that would shield him against potential danger in his professional life. That name, John Reid, is perhaps most recognized as the character name for that queerly-coupled gunslinger, The Lone Ranger. Who was that masked man, indeed?

Performing Perfection, Perfecting Performance

The terror (and for some spectators the pleasure) of Rhoda lies in the ease with which she assumes adult fantasies of white childhood innocence and holds that purity at a distance through masquerade. Stalwart, she seems to possess her own version of double consciousness that she crafts and perfects with a regimented accuracy. Her performance of white childhood innocence has been cultivated over years of rehearsal, mistakes, and self-correction. The audience's introduction to Rhoda, in fact, takes place in the midst of one of these acts of mask-making.

The film opens with Christine sending off her husband to serve on the military base,¹⁷ and Rhoda is shown for the first time posing in front of the mirror with a new pair of oversized, rhinestone-encrusted sunglasses.¹⁸ Indeed, the film introduces layers of theatricality as we meet Rhoda for the first time in what is essentially her private dressing

room, prepping herself for a performance as the best little girl in the world. The minor key music playing in the background coupled with Christine's adverse reaction asks that the spectator be troubled by this juxtaposition: little girl and flashy adult accessory. Enter Monica, who asks "My, my... who is this glamorous Hollywood actress?" But what could be troubling about a young girl playing dress up? What is apparent almost immediately is that Rhoda is no normal little girl playing pretend. As the film's emotional cues suggest and Christine's demeanor reinforces, something more is going on here. Christine seems unduly concerned. There is a back-story, it seems: a conflict precedes this moment for a mother to be concerned that her innocent child has taken on the trappings of adult performance of femininity. This imbrication of innocent, white, asexual girlhood and an adult eroticized glamour is meant to disturb. But there is something more: hidden behind glasses, Rhoda's eyes are empty and hollow. The sunglasses evidence the troubling unknowability and unreadability of Rhoda. As Chuck Jackson suggests, though they never reappear, the scene suggests that Rhoda metaphorically hides behind their dark lenses throughout the remainder of the film.¹⁹ What this highlights, then, is what William Paul calls "a certain unknowability that we must find in all children"²⁰ and the fears of a society unable to locate the true impetus of childhood desires and the manner in which to channel these impulses into their normative outcomes. This unknowability of the child is, in itself, monstrous.

Something else is meant to be troubling as well: because her eyes are obscured from view, we remain initially unaware of where exactly Rhoda's focus lies. It is unclear whether she is indeed admiring herself in the mirror (as one might expect a good little girl

to do) or watching the spectators (parents and filmgoers alike) *watch her*. As her mask of seamliness slowly starts to disintegrate, it becomes more and more apparent that Rhoda, deft observer and “Hollywood actress,” is observing Christine and Monica in the mirror in order to manipulate her own performance for maximum potential. From the outset, Rhoda’s silence and her possession of the gaze troubles her seemingly natural place as The Innocent—a body defined in large part by its emptiness and lack of desire. Rhoda, however, slides into the role of the Watcher, seeming to possess inappropriate knowledge and narcissistic greed. Her look is not so empty as it is calculating and defiant—a unidirectional surveillance (twice removed in a mirror and behind dark glasses) that denies our gaze as well as Christine’s. We can only wonder when she is looking and what she learns. In a short introduction to Rhoda, this bizarre panoptic girl turns traditional adult/child relations on its head—a grotesque inversion that will continue throughout the film.

Surveillance relations figure as a central preoccupation within the cinema of revolting childhood. *Village of the Damned* and *Children of the Damned* feature eerily silent children whose telepathic abilities leave the adults of Midwich laid bare to invasive observation. Similar Watchers in *The Innocents* (1961), *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965), *The Illustrated Man* (1969), *The Omen*, and *The Shining* (1979) seem to know their adult counterparts better than they know themselves. And as I will explore later, *The Exorcist*’s possessed Regan McNeil displays a flourish for psychoanalytic probing into the dark unconscious motivations of any adult within her gaze. As such, these films deconstruct seemingly natural power relations by evacuating the power of looking, knowing, and

pathologizing from the dominion of adulthood. As Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality*, the surveillance of children, in particular their sexuality, was an imperative in the formation of a formalized educational system, so much so that modes of observation were built into the architectural design of childhood spaces.²¹ And of course child-rearing instruction traffics significantly in these notions—from the behaviorist interventions of pre-war child-rearing ideology to the post-war Freudian-infused instruction, where parents vigilantly watched their children for signs of neurosis and stunted development. In these films of Watcher children, those power relations are inverted—the child becomes the parent, and the parent becomes the child: restricted, ignorant, and helpless.

Indeed, Rhoda's entire persona is crafted from observation and meticulously rehearsed: from her perfect piano rendition of "Claire du Lune" to her perfect penmanship (her last name bespeaks the importance of this feature), *The Bad Seed* suggests an alternative, private space of invisible labor where Rhoda fashions her disguises. As spectators, we are privy to this world only on rare occasions, but even we have more access than those family members around her. From the outset, we are made aware, for instance, of Rhoda's distaste for physical affection: in the first scene, Monica hugs little Rhoda after giving her a gift, and the audience, in a privileged position, is able to register Rhoda's reaction of disgust—hugging Monica, the dotting grandmotherly figure, is "gross." All façade, Rhoda seems to bristle at the notion of intimacy and closeness. Rhoda recalls young Veda from *Mildred Pierce* (1945), a kind of proto-monstrous child, who similarly withdraws from maternal affection, saying it makes her feel "sticky."²²

It is the viewer who is granted the most intimate relationship to Rhoda—even closer than her kin.²³ One of the strategies the film utilizes to manufacture tension is to continually give the spectator a modicum more access to Rhoda’s interiority than the film’s characters are allowed so that her performances of “natural” normative childhood become eerily artificial and performative. As such, the audience’s privileged insight into the construction of Rhoda’s façade allows for a perverse perception that is narratively directed.

By performing normative childhood, Rhoda horrifies because she is a contradiction: both too childlike and not childlike enough. For the adults around her, she seems to have combined “acceptable” childhood qualities with “unacceptable” absences: playfulness without innocence, selfishness without ignorance, cuteness without transparency. Rhoda’s demonstrations of avarice and selfishness are certainly compatible with the construction of childhood, but the film also obviously suggests that they have moved beyond “acceptable” standards for children. After receiving the sunglasses, a gift from neighbor Monica, Rhoda responds not with an expected “thank you” but rather by asking “Where’s the case?” Christine is visibly disturbed; clearly Rhoda is asking for too much, and her “Emily Post” decorum has given way to unrestrained greed. Again, the doting Monica lavishes Rhoda with another gift, a locket, and again Rhoda demands more—she wants an additional stone placed in the setting. Christine again objects, but Monica laughs and revels in Rhoda’s pleasure-seeking nature, stating, “How wonderful to meet such a natural little girl. She knows what she wants and she asks for it. Not like these overcivilized little pets.”

Indeed Monica, clearly coded as the film's biggest dupe, revels in "a kind of miserly delight" that Rhoda has for her possessions. Rhoda's desire for a penmanship medal clearly motivates her murder of young Claude Daigle, she kills an elderly woman before the start of the film to secure a snow globe, and her desire for a pair of birds drives her planned murder of Monica. In *Laughing Screaming*, Paul claims that "the elevation of [Rhoda's] hunger for things... moves her into adult society. Since she comes from a comfortable middle-class home with loving parents, we have no way of finding a realistic motivation for her greed. We cannot see it as a compensating desire for what is wanting in her life. Rather, it is simply something that belongs to her culture."²⁴

There is some truth to this: certainly within the post-war consumerist boom, the wanton child has a certain representative currency. Rhoda is desirous and miserly; she seeks to possess and control property and claim it as her own. Like her father, absented and fighting the Cold War, Rhoda charges forward to expand and fortify her borders, to take in more—to conquer. A mini-colonialist, Rhoda has her sights set on conquering the mother-land. However, I disagree that Rhoda's hunger for things necessarily moves her into adult society; rather, as I stressed in the introduction to this dissertation, children are most monstrous when they exaggerate the supposedly normative characteristics of childhood to grotesque proportions. The plucky Trickster in this instance becomes the Demon, as Rhoda will go to any means, authorized by society or not, to achieve her ends. At the school picnic, Rhoda's teacher Miss Fern seems at pains to describe the peculiar circumstances of Rhoda's troubles. "She has no sense of fair play," Miss Fern exclaims, after much fidgeting.

Though Monica praises Rhoda for being “a natural little girl” and not “an overcivilized little pet,” Christine is repeatedly concerned at the unnatural perfection and cuteness that Rhoda displays—her penchant for excessive self-discipline and self-regulation. Throughout the film, Rhoda is praised for her “neat,” “tidy,” and “perfect” exterior, and both Christine and Monica marvel at her ability to stay clean and unsoiled. Rhoda’s headmistress Miss Fern acknowledges that her curtsey is “perfect.” Indeed, as Miss Fern admits through clenched teeth, “she does everything perfectly.” The headmistress is perhaps our Montessori stand-in, troubled because she believes that the child has not exposed herself “to the professional eye,” hidden behind a mask of seamliness. Speaking to Miss Fern, Christine struggles even to vocalize her apprehension: “I... I... I don’t quite know how to say it, but there’s a... mature quality about her that’s disturbing in a child, and my husband and I thought that a school like yours where you believe in, oh, discipline and old-fashioned values might perhaps teach her to be more of a child,” she says. Miss Fern responds simply, “Yes, yes, I know what you mean.” Many critics have noticed that this particular exchange draws on a peculiar type of logic: how would discipline, after all, teach a child to be less mature? Can a self-restrained child to be more playful through discipline? The contradictions of normative childhood—offering up a contradiction to solve a contradiction—equally trouble the film’s characters.

What is unnatural about her maturity, then, is Rhoda’s body “under her individual control, not the site of parental control performances (e.g. baths, hair brushing, what and how much food a child will eat, etc.).”²⁵ In the novel, Miss Fern confesses the

strangeness of Rhoda this way: “[S]he doesn’t need others, the way most of us do. She is such a self-sufficient little girl! Never in my life have I seen somebody so completely all-of-one-piece!”²⁶ Rhoda does not fit in with the tenuous space of childhood because she seems to have no need for it. Indeed, a child only remains a child through its dependency and its constant need for correction—the engine that drives parental control performances. As adult/child relations are solidified through the unachievability of the ideal state of childhood—what Jacqueline Rose called “the impossibility of childhood” in her book title²⁷—the adultlike child is doubly troublesome: unguided, s/he seems to house knowledge inappropriate and unauthorized for her/his body. A body in revolt against adult investment, the adultlike child possesses a seemingly complete interior with an incomplete exterior. The dual demands of innocence and dependence are best achieved through a child’s emptiness, and such emptiness can only be evidenced through a child’s consistent need to be corrected, molded, and filled up with authoritative adult knowledge.

As James Kincaid notes of the semiotic utility of fetishized innocence and dependence, “[t]he child carries for us the things we somehow cannot carry ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasures so great we would not, without the child, know how to contain them.”²⁸ By burdening children with that which we will not carry ourselves, adults are allowed the latitude of self-determination. Childhood is constructed as a natural state that can never be achieved, fetishized as a lost state through nostalgia.

But *The Bad Seed*'s horror turns on the impossibility of this normative childhood—based in contradiction, animated by futility. To meet its demands and to perform it so well is to upset the structural integrity of adulthood, defined by opposition. Actually to achieve its demands is to be a phony. To be so aware of it so as to wear it as a mask is to be a monster.

Rhoda's Troubling Cuteness

It is this final contradiction—Rhoda's troubling cuteness—that finds the characters in a state of dread seemingly beyond articulation. There seems to be a dearth of vocabulary for the characters to articulate the troubling unnaturalness of the perfect child. If the characters in *The Bad Seed* are disturbed, it is not because Rhoda is a foreign entity within the home, or somehow outside of the discourse about childhood. Through grotesquery and imitation, *The Bad Seed* extends the construction of normative (white, middle-class, heterosexual) childhood not only through illuminating its contradictions but also by exposing it as an unnatural state that is only available to certain bodies. More specifically, the film dislocates childhood from children's bodies, severing the essentialized link between the two. Part of Rhoda's disturbing nature is certainly to be located in the manner in which she manipulates those around her by performing her interpellated role as "child." Building on Lori Merish's theory of "the cute,"²⁹ critic Chuck Jackson argues "*The Bad Seed*, both in film and novel, deconstructs 'cuteness' and exposes it as a performable aesthetic, one that depends on a specific race, class, and gender combination."³⁰ Rhoda's cuteness is indeed troubling because she troubles what it

means to be “cute.” Given the cultural insistence upon this infeasible state, reiterated and repackaged as natural childhood, we may say that in exposure, *The Bad Seed* is the site wherein the *normative* becomes the *performative*. Or more accurately, it is where normative white childhood is revealed to be the performative.

In speaking of cinema, childhood, whiteness, cuteness, and performance, we can only find ourselves at one place. Shirley Temple stands (or taps, rather) at the nexus of these cultural discourses and exists as the unspoken subtext through which and against which *The Bad Seed* formulates its revolting child. Rhoda imitates Temple with an almost-but-not-quite eeriness—the same steps but a different aim. It is consciously performative; it is (nod to Butler) repetition with difference. Rhoda eschews the slacks and denim of the era in favor of dresses, signifiers of an earlier construction of childhood female purity, and prefers to play “garden party” rather than “blind man’s base.” Monica aligns Rhoda with the mannered doyens of etiquette, calling her “Miss Emily Post” and stating, “Isn’t she the perfect old fashioned little girl?” Of all the characters, Monica seems the most lacking in awareness, the most untroubled by Rhoda’s contradictions: was she not praising Rhoda earlier for not being “one of those overcivilized little pets”? For Monica, Rhoda seems to inspire a sort of nostalgic pining³¹ for a lost formation of white girlhood, one perhaps epitomized by Temple in all her impossibly seraphimed preciousness.

It is no mistake, then, that both Temple and McCormack are portrayed as “living dolls” in their studio publicity shots. Indeed, in the promotional shots for *The Bad Seed*, McCormack (as Rhoda) is staged as to mimic exactly, in form and content, photos of

Temple used during her career. In each, the young girl is seated with a doll on her lap that looks exactly like the child actress herself. The ersatz dolls possess the same hairstyle, same face, and the same clothing as their weightier counterparts. In each, the child sits with her inanimate doppelganger on her lap, posing for the camera's gaze. A similar publicity image of McCormack is not as seemingly wholesome: the doll is larger, more lifelike. Indeed, the distinction between the child-star-as-product and the actual doll-as-product breaks down here.

That Temple is both so typical as to be archetypal and so fantastic as to be phantasmagoric marks her utility as an avatar of normative social values. Her name alone suggests a type of ascendancy, an impossibility of allocution that can be worshiped only from afar. She is the site wherein parental fantasies intermingle dangerously with pedophilic fantasies, almost indistinguishable in their mooning over her cherubic coquettishness. Of Temple, Graham Greene once scandalously suggested in 1937 that "infancy is her disguise, her appeal is more secret and more adult." He continues in a set of terms very familiar to this dissertation, stating that "[a]dult emotions of love and grief glissade across the mask of childhood, a childhood skin deep."³²

In a related vein, Salvador Dali portrayed Temple as a site of horrifying contradiction in his painting "Shirley Temple, The Youngest, Most Sacred Monster of the Cinema in Her Time" or the "Barcelona Sphinx" in 1939. In the painting, Temple is represented with the red naked body of a lioness, complete with prominent breasts and claws. Beneath her on the desert ground are the skeletal remains of her last kill upon which she languidly rests. Like Greene, Dali suggests a highly sexualized form of

idolatry that circumnavigates around Temple's image. The zoomorphic quality of the image suggests a grotesquery as well—a collision of binary opposites (human and animal, adult and child, savagery and passivity, sex and innocence) that marks the incoherent body of the revolting child as well. If Greene and Dali saw something grotesque and incompatible in the body of Temple, then *The Bad Seed* revisits this terrain within the context of horror. Rhoda takes the signifiers of Temple—cuteness, self-sufficiency, white innocence—and wields them against those who would subjugate her to the confines of normative childhood.

In Rhoda's hands, the tap shoes that Temple once used in her joyously exuberant performances to reunite the family (and often, the nation) become instruments of murder: as a means of insuring Claude's death, Rhoda beats his hands with her shoes as he dangles from the pier. As Jackson notes, "*The Bad Seed* twists the meaning of 'tap shoes,' turning them from a cute, performative adjunct into an instrument of evil and danger."³³ If this ridiculous reiteration of Temple's image reads as glib and almost playful, surely this text contains the seeds of its own reinterpretation as comedy within its narrative strains. While it is not necessary to claim intentionality—that the filmmakers sought out to create a work of camp that exaggerated the artificiality of white childhood innocence for satire—I would say instead that the film underscores the convergent qualities of horror and camp. As such, the text articulates (like Greene and Dali) the perversity, the artificiality, and the impossibility of Temple with uncanny accuracy.

A Basket Full of Performance

In the cover art for the reissued video of *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda is foregrounded, a vacant grin on her face, while Christine stares at her daughter from the background, holding a poison bottle in her hand and gripping her womb. The tagline states simply: “For little Rhoda, murder is child’s play.” It is a cute line but one that holds more weight than at first seems implied. Indeed, for little Rhoda, *childhood itself* is child’s play, one that she plays all the time.

Though this chapter proceeds by reading *The Bad Seed* centrally, I want to stress the representative quality of this text for the subgenre as a whole. *The Bad Seed* has been outright imitated twice, once as a made-for-TV version in 1985 and again as *The Good Son* (1993), with a cherubic Macaulay Caulkin as Rhoda’s manchild counterpart. The cinema of revolting childhood as a whole is heavily populated with masked moppets, both in literal and figurative guises. Perhaps most famously, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) opens with an extended POV sequence through the eyeholes of a Halloween mask, in which the stalker stabs a teenage girl. Later, the murderer is unmasked and revealed to be a six-year-old boy, Michael Myers (Will Sandon). Arresting as this opening may be, audiences witnessed this restricted child’s POV in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), where young Tootie (Margaret O’Brien) ushers in a Gothicized interlude in the Technicolor musical by donning a Halloween mask and playing pranks on the townspeople. Though presented as playful, the acts also contain a degree of repressed rage, as neglected Tootie would later literalize by violently destroying snowmen that resembled her parents.³⁴ Masked children make appearances in other films as well: *Alice*, *Sweet Alice* (1977) and *Bloody Birthday* (1981), for instance. In all cases, the mask is

both of childhood in its reliance upon fantasy and play and yet set apart from childhood in its inaccessibility and impenetrable façade. In the remake of *Halloween* (2007), young Michael's refusal to remove any of the masks he has fashioned for himself functions as definitive evidence of his homicidal psychosis. More commonly, however, the revolting children of cinema wear masks of seamliness, in films as varied as *The Children's Hour* (1961), *The Innocents* (1962), *Lolita* (1963), *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965), *Don't Deliver Us from Evil* (1970), *Devil Times Five* (1974), *The Omen* (1975), *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1975), *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976), *Kiss of the Tarantula* (1976), *The Children* (1980), *The Pit* (1980), *Beware: Children at Play* (1989), *Pet Semetary* (1989), *The Good Son* (1993), *Hardy Candy* (2005), and *Joshua* (2007).

Additionally, Rhoda plays “mind games,” as it were—something certainly within the realm of childhood but normally unthreatening because of their believed transparency of motive. Rhoda, however, is not so readable. She has a full repertoire of games at her disposal to cast herself in the light of innocence and to reify the parent/child paradigm. She consistently uses play that reinstates her childlike qualities, such as tapping or playing the piano, as tools to distract adults when suspicions arise—when setting Leroy the groundskeeper on fire, for instance, she plays “Claire du Lune” to drown out his screaming. But more calculatingly, she uses scripted and rehearsed call-and-response games to remind adults of their appropriate roles within the parent/child construction. For instance, after the Daigle boy's death, Christine frets about how she will comfort her daughter in the face of this tragedy. Like Rhoda, Christine prepares herself for a performance: as the comforting mother. When Rhoda arrives, however, Christine realizes

that Rhoda in fact needs no comforting, only a sandwich. Christine persists, holding Rhoda to her, and stating that she knows how awful Rhoda must feel. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Rhoda. “I don’t *feel* any way at all.” Immediately, Rhoda realizes that this is not the appropriate response within the child/mother paradigm, and she rushes to her mother’s side, kisses her hands, and hugs her tightly. Christine, however, knows that her child “doesn’t like to be pawed,” and she kneels down and asks Rhoda, “Have you been naughty?” Rhoda senses that her previous performance did not recast her in an innocent light... yet. So she begins another game, one that we have seen her perform with her father at the start of the film. “What would you give me if I gave you a basket of kisses?” she asks. This time, the ritual performance works, and Christine assumes her role, replying, “I’ll give you a basket of hugs!”

As evidence of Rhoda’s wrongdoings mount, however, the use of the game begins to unsettle rather than resolve. Christine begins to see Rhoda’s games as the enabling mechanism behind her deceit and criminality rather than evidence of her innocence and transparency. Even with this growing awareness, however, Christine seems unable to resist “playing” herself—performing her role as good mother. After Christine discovers Claude’s medal in Rhoda’s jewelry box, Rhoda must perform the game three times before Christine finally acquiesces. During this segment, Rhoda even caresses her mother’s face and begins a new game by stating, “Oh, I’ve got the prettiest mother. I’ve got the nicest mother. That’s what I tell everybody—I’ve got the sweetest mother.” Her game of comforting her mother eerily reflects the role that Christine wished to perform in

comforting her daughter after the death of the Daigle boy, suggesting that Rhoda understands the performative nature of both her role and her mother's.

Rhoda's playing cute comes to a head in the film's climactic sequence where Christine finally uncovers the evidence she needs to confront her suspicions about the Daigle boy's death. To respond to the accusations from her mother, Rhoda again performs two of the games that she uses to deflect attention from her monstrous acts and to reestablish the paradigm of childhood innocence. Both of these games have been successful earlier in the film. First, she caresses her mother's face, stating, "Oh, I've got the prettiest mother. I've got the nicest mother." This game first functions to reify the parent/child construction through her repetition of the word "mother" and thereby reminds Christine of her place within it. But it also allows Rhoda the opportunity to perform "positive" childhood emotions of affection and love to distract from the "negative" emotions of greed and rage that she demonstrated during her confession. Rhoda's second game, a call-and-respond exercise, acts as a barometer to gauge the success of her performances. When she asks, "What would you give me if I gave you a basket of kisses?," a response of "I'll give you a basket of hugs!" confirms the parent/child paradigm.

In this scene, however, Rhoda's performance of innocence finally fails. Christine has decided to protect her daughter from the authorities by taking both Rhoda's life and her own that night. In wearing a mask and turning lies and deceit into a game, Rhoda transforms the safeness of child's play found in make believe and imaginative storytelling into something monstrous.

A Very Dangerous Combination

As mentioned early in this chapter, this film faced a fair amount of resistance from the PCA, and these anxieties were located primarily upon the possibility of pleasurable reception. As Jerold Simmons notes, *The Bad Seed* was brought before the PCA shortly after a period of transition, as longtime director Joseph L. Breen was replaced by Geoffrey Shurlock, believed to a more liberal interpreter of the Code's bylaws.³⁵ But despite some of Shurlock's more amenable leanings in the portrayal of drug use for instance, he was a firm believer in "media effects" model of cinematic influence, especially as children were concerned. In reference to *The Bad Seed*, Shurlock was particularly concerned that the film would have "a very powerful effect on impressionable children."³⁶ PCA reader Morris Murphy goes further, stating that "[t]he identification of youngsters with Rhoda . . . will be very complete. They will understand her *effective* killing of three person who stood in her way, while at the same time since Rhoda is a poised, charming child, they will *completely* miss her psychotic and tragic nature . . . a very dangerous combination."³⁷

I wonder whether to take this at face value: certainly the film was not intended for (or likely seen by) viewers of young Rhoda's age. The anxiety about young viewers, however, seems prescient—this period witnesses an increasingly expanding generation gap and an increasing inability of adults to define the world in which their children lived.

In keeping with the logic of the period, “the youth” were seen as both the cause and the solution, and controlling the consumption of its future citizens was presumably the future (of the nation/race/social fabric). As Nicholas Sammond notes, “[t]he idea of the child as plastic, and the point at which a culture, arising from its natural foundation, is susceptible to intervention”³⁸ underpins the control of child consumption as a means of shaping the future.

Two cinematic elements respond to these anxieties. One is a different ending from the play. In the dramatic version, Christine dies from her gunshot wound and Rhoda survives, unmistakably planning more crimes now that her only restraints have been eliminated. In contrast, in the final scene of the film a bolt of lightning strikes and kills Rhoda—delivering ultimate punishment to Rhoda (a punishment that Christine, the consummate failure, is unable to administer). The film’s use of lightning bolt from on high—a Zeus *ex machina*, if you will—was intended to satisfy the PCA’s desire for definitive moral determinacy, and it also reinscribes the tale as being solved by the intervention of male dominance and authority. As Paul succinctly puts it, “When the daddies are away, the girls did play, but at the end, God, the ultimate patriarch, makes an appearance and, boy, is he angry!”³⁹

Several reviewers at the time balked at this change, deriding it as heavy-handed and overly moralistic. Interestingly, the studio chose to capitalize on the script changes by centralizing the altered ending in the promotional materials. As a screenplay adapted from a popular book and play, the film was given a “freshness” and newness by the promise of a reauthored climax. As the film trailer says, “When you see it we will

appreciate your not divulging its startling climax... for you have *never* seen a picture like this before!” This is duly notable: the audience is “in on” a secret, which pledges to be almost unspeakable in its salaciousness. And second, though the ending is less taboo (in terms of the PCA) by not letting Rhoda “get away” with murder, the perversity of her elimination—the movie chooses (off-screen or not) to electrocute a ten-year-old girl to death—delivers a pound-for-pound retribution reserved for only the Frankenstein monsters and Gojiras of the cinematic imagination.

A second element, actually transplanted from the theatrical version of *The Bad Seed*, is a “curtain call” in which the actors appear on stage/screen as themselves—delivering a highly unusual Brechtian moment of distanciation almost entirely absent from classical Hollywood cinema. With a title card “The End” still on the screen, an announcer says “And now, ladies and gentlemen—our wonderful cast.” As the cast members walk through the door one by one, the announcer introduces them: “Mr. Henry Jones as Leroy,” for instance. The curtain call makes a firm break from the film itself, as each character seems divested of the melodramatic pathos of the previous two hours. Henry Jones, the repugnant man-child of the film, enters smiling and humble with a simple nod towards the audience.

Only Rhoda, or “Patty McCormack as Rhoda,” seems to have maintained the performance façade—curtseying and smiling, she seems not have changed at all when the curtain call arrives. Consequently, we are reminded that Rhoda is *all* façade. McCormack, for her part, is an actress playing a role who is playing a role. To lift the veil of “role” and reveal the natural cute little girl underneath is in fact unsettling since the narrative itself

has deemed this very formation artificial. How, then, to set things right? “Nancy Kelly as Christine” soon appears in the doorway, turns to McCormick, and says “And as for you...” Crossing over to McCormack on the couch, she proceeds to bend the girl over her knee and spank her. This same scene was repeated night after night in the play, giving credence to Paul’s suggestion that this is “punishment as ritual, and we need rituals to assuage all the anxieties the play/film has given rise to” (285). The second post-script, then, is a final parental control performance of the physical punishment unavailable during the narrative.

This is a text that seems to demand an enormous amount of closure—a text that seems to accumulate an immense amount of paranoia around issues of identification and interpretation. I want to stress here the degree to which censors were concerned that spectators (particularly children) would identify with Rhoda in some way. This runs counter to the traditional view of this film (and horror films in general) that Rhoda was “merely” an abjection. That such an anxiety warranted not one but two excessively didactic endings undeniably speaks to the dangerous quality of Rhoda as a figuration and subversively oppositional pleasure inherent within the text.⁴⁰

For *The Bad Seed*, whose impish tap-shoed-killer dances through a world of subaltern retribution, the more prescient pleasure may be the manner in which she inverts the social order and reveals the artificiality of natural childhood. The film’s attempts at closure seem delusional in their attempts to contain the trickster presence that they have released in the form of Rhoda. Indeed, one wonders how containable Rhoda’s monstrosity is within the generic network that the film finds itself—part invasion horror, part maternal melodrama—as both horror and melodrama are predicated on disrupting order and arousing emotive (fearful, lachrymose) responses. As Laura Mulvey notes of

melodrama, “[t]he strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.”⁴¹ What, if anything, is reconciled at the end of *The Bad Seed*? Can Rhoda’s wrongness be contained within the narrative of matrilineal psychosis? Even critics at the time derided the film’s eugenic explanation as a facile attempt to manage something as nebulous as evil and human development. Can the film’s eugenic escape hatch truly eject the spectator from the spectacle-ridden site of childhood perversion? Is Christine absolved through her suffering—a gunshot wound to the head and a self-flagellating mea culpa? What is she guilty of again—not asking for help, giving birth, being a monster herself? Has God’s definitive lightning bolt successfully eliminated our yearling ne’er-do-well? More importantly, has the rain on the lake where she was struck washed away the “narrative dust” that has been kicked up along the way?

From Bad Seeds Come Pansies

So what does this mean for the queer spectator? I return to the utility of the revolting child for the queer spectator. These claims are meant to be both minoritizing (the revolting child animates a foundational form of queer experience, i.e. closeting or masking) and universalizing (the revolting child is queer and presents a counterhegemonic pleasure available to everyone, i.e. revolt against parental or religious authority). In doing both, I do not want to lose sight of queer bodies in favor of phantasmagoric emotive contingencies. As Sedgwick notes, queerness “can never and

must never stand outside the province of gay and lesbian means from which it arises. For to disavow those meanings or to displace them from the term's definitional center would be to dematerialize the possibility of queerness itself."⁴² As such, I want to pause for a moment to consider the coordinate quality of the adultlike child for queer bodies. Certainly infantilization has been and continues to be a common tool of a hegemonic order. Women have long been regarded in social and juridical discourse as near-children—tethered to childhood and second-class citizenship by enforcing a discourse of weakness and dependency as co-existent with (white) femininity. Colonized and non-white communities in general have been subject to a paternal world order, supposedly ameliorated by fetishizing innocence (which is to say, ignorance) and purity as essentialized components of their character.

As an essential component of hierarchical order, queers are also subject to infantilization, but their very identity threatens one of the essential components of childhood: innocence. As Kathryn Bond Stockton notes, the actual gay or lesbian child is an impossibility within our cultural discourses. To come out as a gay or lesbian, claims Stockton, is literally to “kill” the straight child who existed within the norms of childhood innocence and unknowingness: “[t]he phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where and when a straight person died... and yet, by the time the marker is raised (‘I was a gay child’), it would seem ‘the child’ has died with the straight.”⁴³ To be “gay,” defined by sexual desire for a members of the same sex, is incompatible with the construction of the child, defined in large part by its presumed lack of libidinal desire. As infantilized subjects who lack the possibility of childhood innocence, queers can only be understood

as children gone wrong, too-knowing children, monstrous in their murder of the innocent straight child.

Indeed many of us, as queer adults, find pleasure in erecting that tombstone—of locating nascent queerness in our origins. Stories of wearing mommy’s makeup or kissing the girl next door are retroactive signposts of our future selves—not moments of inconsequential childhood exploration and experimentation, but clear directives of things to come. In those stories of “they-should-have-known-when,” we reconstruct our past selves as always-already queer, grafting adult sexuality and yearnings onto the messiness and incoherency of our development. These stories become a breadcrumb path to coherent identity formation. In this way, we create very adultlike children as our past selves—as if they contained our seemingly coherent future selves within them, homunculus-like, waiting to emerge. The retroactively queer child of remembrance is quite larvated, I would say. It is no surprise, then, that the revolting child would be so familiar, so pleasurable. As adults within the bodies of children, they name the site of queer ontological discovery—the past selves that we wished we could have been, that we tell ourselves we were.

One of the curious legacies of *The Bad Seed* is the high degree to which it is now perceived as a classic work of camp within queer communities. The text itself is viewed frequently as camp—in a sort of echelon with other excessive mid-century female-centered texts such as *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, to name a few. In 2007, it was one of the featured films at the Philadelphia Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in addition to being a regular fixture at the Castro Theatre

in San Francisco. Indeed, its excessiveness, specifically, is where to locate an oppositional and specifically queer pleasure. The text exudes camp whether looking to the figure of Rhoda, a grotesque Temple, pleasurable in her inversion; the staginess of the acting style, overwrought and thick with what Sontag called “strained seriousness”⁴⁴; or the series of removes that comprise (and compromise) the ending of the film, almost directing the spectator to dislocate from the film and view it as a construct. If, in the final assessment, camp reading has become the dominant mode of reading the film— then the excessiveness of the text and its own fanatical paranoia over its interpretive possibilities motivates a distantiated reading.

It has additionally inspired a number of camp/queer iterations in a variety of mediums (theater, television, and film). I want to close the chapter by exploring some of these reception practices and then rejoining them with the analysis that has preceded this to offer insight into this phenomenon. The accumulation of these perverse reading practices has, over the years, fortified my own pleasurable reading of the text. My close reading of the text, in turn, has sought to locate queerness as central to the *mise-en-scène* of desire within the text. I admit some trepidation in offering up the following examples *as* evidence of queer reception, as if only the reauthoring of texts stands in for support. It also tends to stabilize the text itself as somehow straight-owned, dominant culture-entitled—for use by queers, but only through the ingenuity of reauthoring. As Alex Doty notes, “[i]n the context of a heterocentrist (homophobic, sexist) culture, close reading often becomes a social and political strategy, perhaps through overwhelming details and examples we can make what is invisible to so many visible and what is denied

possible.”⁴⁵ I offer these examples up instead as something more radiosopic, that, in rereading the text reveals its intrinsic queerness. These reauthorings destabilize dominant meaning and rearrange the set pieces within the mise-en-scène of desire to locate pleasurable truths about the peculiarity of the revolting child.

I will start with two anecdotal notes that underline the degree to which this project is, in large part, prompted by an investigation of my own reception. In 2007, I emailed Stockton to express my admiration for her work on queer childhood, and I mentioned my own interest in queerness and bad children, of which I offered up *The Bad Seed* as an example. She emailed back, saying “as you might picture, I even have a T-shirt that reads ‘Bad Seed’ picked up in Provincetown a few years ago. (You, of course, may have one too.) That is a text I (predictably) love and have taught for years.”⁴⁶ The second occurred in a conversation with a member of my dissertation committee, Harry Benshoff. In discussing the problem of evidence when it comes to the queer reception of these films, he suggested that he send me a picture of one of his friends dressed as Rhoda for Halloween. He added, “We all have one of those, I bet.”⁴⁷

It just so turns out that I do. Moreover, whenever I bring up my dissertation in a group of gay men, invariably the text that comes into discussion is *The Bad Seed*. Often some of them will be able to deliver the “basket of hugs” line, one may offer a Nancy Kelly-esque melodramatic “Rhoooooda!” or beat his fists against his polluted mock-womb. This is all to say that *The Bad Seed* enjoys an affectionate place within gay and lesbian interpretative communities,⁴⁸ what Elizabeth Gazik appropriately called “a queer sort of fandom” when analyzing another, related film about murderous little moppets.⁴⁹

And now something less anecdotal: in the special features commentary for the 1994 DVD release of *The Bad Seed* (1956), two figures share a playful 129-minute dialogue about the film. One of these individuals is quite expected: McCormick, the eponymous star of the film, talks extensively about her experience making the film, the actors with whom she performed, and specifically what it was like to play the now-infamous child monster Rhoda. The other individual is not so expected: Charles Busch, self-described “actor, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, director, drag legend,” is neither someone involved in the original production nor is he what one would deem a traditional “film historian,” per se. Busch is perhaps best known as a playwright whose theatrical productions (including *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, *Psycho Beach Party*, and *Die, Mommie! Die!*) employ camp to send up familiar cinematic genres. Though quite versed in the intricacies of the film’s production, he instead focuses upon the film’s reception, in particular its place within queer spectatorial communities. As Busch notes, *The Bad Seed* has become a camp property embraced by queer audiences. As he says, “I think there’s been more camp parodies of this film, and more 200-pound drag queens dressed up like Rhoda than I can count.”⁵⁰ Indeed, the modern revival of the drama version of *The Bad Seed* has been largely refigured as a camp stage production in cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In every case, a man in drag performs the role of Rhoda, and in Chicago the play is refigured as a full-stage, lavish musical. Of the LA restaging, *The Hollywood Independent* wrote that the production “[t]urns Maxwell Anderson’s downbeat play into comic madness.”⁵¹

A few more select examples: in 1992, independent lesbian filmmaker Sadie

Benning made a twenty-minute short entitled “It Wasn’t Love,” a lesbian coming-of-age story shot on a rudimentary Pixelvision camera. In it, the filmmaker incorporates a few scenes from *The Bad Seed* (recorded on her television) into an extended meditation on bad girls, erotic desire, and youthful rebellion. The viewer witnesses one of Rhoda’s more pronounced tantrums, slamming her fists upon her legs before a cut to Christine tenderly says “Rhoda, come here to me.” As Rhoda approaches and embraces her mother, Prince’s 1979 hit “I Wanna Be Your Lover” replaces the soundtrack as the androgynous singer coos “I get discouraged / Cause you treat me just like a child.” During this sequence, the accompanying imagery is of Rhoda embracing her mother, buried in her bosom, or stroking her mother’s face and repeating “what a beautiful mother I have. What a sweet mother.” The short film playfully evokes the disavowed mother/daughter erotics of the film and draws them into a narrative of lesbian becomingness.

In 1995, McCormack, now fifty, starred in the film *Mommy*, the unofficial sequel to *The Bad Seed*. In the film, McCormack’s unnamed (pro)antagonist, a psychotically overprotective mother, becomes incensed that her twelve-year-old daughter has not won the “Student of the Year” Award (the penmanship medal of the 1990s, no doubt). In a rage, she murders the teacher who stands in her daughter’s way but battles suspicion by both a homicide detective and meddlesome insurance agent. Accompanying the film are a number of delightful taglines, such as “Never let her tuck you in!” and, my personal favorite, “June Cleaver... with a cleaver!” The film is no less campy as it consistently references and plays with its source material. The intertextuality extends to other properties as well, adopting other revolting children into its fold: Jason Miller, best

known as the self-doubting younger priest Father Karras in *The Exorcist* (1973), plays the rescuer-cum-father figure homicide detective.

Finally, Rhoda finds a campy echo when the television show *The Addams Family* was brought to the big screen in 1991 and again in 1993. Wednesday Addams (Lisa Loring), the television show's pigtailed moribund child, was a sort of softened Rhoda, obsessed with death but not homicidal herself. The show itself was thick with campy extravagance, playing upon a series of inversions that marked them as lovable freaks within the confines of normative suburban culture. For her parents, Wednesday's desire to play in the graveyard and hold séances in the attic rather than hop-scotch and jump rope bespeak to her naturalness. Interestingly, several of the promotional images of Wednesday involve a familiar formation: like Rhoda and Temple before her, Wednesday is shown posed in a chair with a little doll on her lap that, in dress, resembles the young girl. The only difference: Wednesday's doll, Marie Antoinette, has lost her head.

In 2001, the already-camped series would get a heavily queered makeover penned by frequent Tim Burton collaborators Caroline Thompson and Larry Wilson for the first film and Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey*, *In & Out*, *The Stepford Wives*) for the second installation. As a retooled character, Wednesday (Christina Ricci) is an unabashedly queer mouthpiece, defiantly oppositional to heteronormative behavior and preoccupations—one terror is to be locked in a room with cute kitten posters and an evening of Disney films. At the summer camp Thanksgiving Day pageant, she leads a child revolt against revisionist colonist dramas by highjacking the play and delivering an impassioned monologue as Pocahontas:

You have taken the land which is rightfully ours. Years from now my people will be forced to live in mobile homes on reservations. Your people will wear cardigans, and drink highballs. We will sell our bracelets by the road sides; you will play golf and enjoy hot hors d'oeuvres. My people will have pain and degradation. Your people will have stick shifts. The gods of my tribe have spoken. They have said, "Do not trust the Pilgrims, especially Sarah Miller.'

After this, she and her collection of non-normative “bad” children (raced, disabled, lower class) capture and enslave the adult pageant-goers and their privileged children, echoing through comedy what would become a horrifying narrative possibility in the child-as-collective films.

What, ultimately, to make of this? What of author William March, who expressed a deep empathy and identification with his murderous child creation—his hideous progeny?⁵² What makes so many queer subjects take on identification with this young girl and her iterations? What makes Rhoda Penmark, so abjected within the heteronormative family, such a likely candidate for queer adoption? When I was formulating this project early on in my studies, I mentioned this film to Linda Mizejewski, the chair of the Women’s Studies program at Ohio State. Very quickly, she responded how much she loved the film and added, “I mean, at the time we were watching Shirley Temple on TV, and God, we hated her. She was so damn perfect.”⁵³

Pinning down the peculiar pleasures of this film is fairly difficult: it occurs within a matrix of desires both to punish the child and to be the child. The cinema of the revolting child provides the phantasmagoric space wherein the child is being beaten, the child is beating, the spectator is the child, the spectator is the abuser, and the spectator is the dislocated subject. Rhoda fascinates desire because she allows the spectator to

animate all of these desires, and for queer spectators she allows that specific pleasure of turning societal expectations upon itself. She is what the cultural discourse has foisted upon queerness—a perpetual child, unable or unwilling to grow up, dangerous in her hedonism and capricious in her will. Worse, this sideways-growing child harbors secret knowledge incompatible with the body of child—Rhoda’s first victim was the innocent child supposedly within her. In this figuration, hiding and pretending and being-as-one-is-not provides an animistic fantasy of power over one’s oppressors where (as in Tobias’s memoir) childhood experience and adult reflection can come together. In this fantasy space, spectators can circumnavigate the trauma of queer becoming by grafting a camp worldview of life-as-performance onto those moments when the roles were still unlearned and before we knew how to wear the mask.

Demons are a Girl's Best Friend: Possession as Transgression

What creates the sexual outlaw? Rage... Rage at law as criminal, doctors as perpetrators of sick myths. Religion as killer. Rage at the selective use of Biblical scripture to condone hatred.

....

In sex moments pressurized into high intensity by life-crushing strictures challenged, the sexual outlaw experiences to the utmost the rush of soul, blood, cum through every channel of his being into the physical and psychical discharge of the fully awakened, living, *defiant* body.¹

-- John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary*

One of the highlights of my undergraduate days at The Ohio State University was a spring quarter in 2002 when I had the pleasure to take a class on “Horror and Gender” in the Women’s Studies department. It was, indeed, a proto-scholar’s dream—my two favorite academic obsessions together in one class: gender and genre... queerness and horror. In the discussion the day after watching Brian DePalma’s *Carrie* (1976), the class examined the abject monstrosity of Carrie White as she annihilated the student body in her high school gymnasium. One by one, the students publically registered their disgust. To my fellow classmates, Carrie was monster, on par with Freddy Kreuger, Jason

Voorhees, or Leatherface. Finally I raised my hand and asked, meekly, “Didn’t anyone else feel sorry for her? I mean, didn’t we all want her classmates to die?”

Silence. Not one vote of support for my (apparently) wildly askew worldview. Granted, it was a bad time to wallow in revenge fantasies about the indiscriminate death of high schoolers—the Columbine shooting was still in the news at the time. But still, it was a strange moment for me. It is an eye-opening experience being confronted with the oppositional nature of your own pleasure. When you find yourself in that consensus-aligned space where your sundry desire is marked as outside or unauthorized, the relative safeness of cinematic fantasy becomes shaken. Ruby Rich once claimed that cinema “inspire[s] gay and lesbian viewers to become... ‘ultimate dialecticians,’ watching the screen (hopefully) out of one eye, and members of the audience (suspiciously) out of the other.”² In that moment, offering up my own perversity for public consumption, I felt as though I had not been watchful enough.

In her introduction to *Perverse Spectators*, Janet Staiger uses the notion of *perverse* spectatorship to describe a relationship to the cinematic that does not “do what is expected” and chooses to “rehierarchize from expectations.”³ The breadth of Staiger’s term allows for a wide incorporation of reception practices, from reading horror within a camp or comedic framework to consideration of cult reception and alternative systems of value. As such, I find the possibilities of the term useful in discussing the films of adolescent female possession, as perversion-become-spectacle is both the films’ unspeakable horror and disavowed promise. The taboo-crossing of these films—the sexualized child, the violent child, the uncontrolled child, the abused child—opens a

phantasmogoric space for spectators to *become* perverse and to wallow in perversity. I am also drawn to the term's fraternal connection to queer spectatorship. Ellis Hanson describes queerness as "a domain virtually synonymous with homosexuality and yet wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities [that] challenge the familiar distinction between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women."⁴ This chapter will cover a range of spectatorial responses that are undoubtedly perverse in their unexpected, unauthorized reception and, I argue, queer in their orientation and pleasure. In mining this reception territory, I move beyond the textual to compare the mainstream and the fan reception of Linda Blair's star image, which are alternately concerned with recapitulating or reauthoring the film to meet divergent spectatorial pleasures.

This chapter, like the last, will proceed by case study. Though I began with *Carrie* (and my unauthorized reading thereof), I will focus instead on Carrie's equally powerful and substantially more profane sister-in-crime Regan McNeil, the enfant terrible of *The Exorcist* (1967) fame. Carrie does erupt into the text at certain key moments, however, much like her hand coming out of the grave at the close of DePalma's film (or my hand raised in that Women's Studies class). I will allow her that—this is Carrie's way. Some of their other dangerous sisters—Charlie McGee of *Firestarter* (1984), Gillian Bellaver from *The Fury* (1978), the eponymous possessed child from Robert Wise's *Audrey Rose*, or Jennifer Corvino from Dario Argento's *Phenomena*—might also have made appearances, though in more minor roles. I will also note a handful of the imitative texts such as the Hammer exploitation film *To The Devil a Daughter* (1975), which sought to

collect on *The Exorcist*'s substantial box office success. This is a dangerous pubescent sorority, one whose members Barbara Creed has deliciously referred to as “baby bitches from hell.”⁵ In their puerile perversion, they combine the unlimited potential of childhood dreaming with the budding danger of adult female sexuality. Recall the Destroyer from this dissertation's typology of childhood representation, who combines the imaginative capacity of the Dreamer with malice, rage, and adult warmongering. These young women witness a terrifying development: if Rhoda Penmark is the bad seed, then these young women are (in that tired cliché for female sexual genitalia) seeds grown and in bloom, but perhaps resembling Venus fly traps rather than ornate flowers. Indeed, if Rhoda was larvated in her queerness, then Regan gestates and emerges—enraged, powerful, and vengeful. Regan is Rhoda grown tired of winning at hide-and-go-seek. If she is unrecognizable, it is because rage is a distortive emotion—it emerges from the body with profanity, sacrilege, piss, menses, vomit, and bile—all incompatible with the body of a proper white, innocent, “good” little girl. These are Children of Nature as well, but not the natural world of the Romantic poets that promises growth and renewal. Instead they avatars of nature's destructive side, Feral Children whose unchecked aggression and savagery rejects all notions of development: physical, sexual, and even evolutionary.

The Exorcist, directed by William Friedkin and based on a novel by William Blatty, is the story of twelve-year-old Regan McNeil (Linda Blair) who, for reasons unknown, becomes possessed by a demon (voiced by actress Mercedes McCambridge). The change in Regan's personality begins slowly—she uses foul language, urinates on

the carpet, and exhibits inexplicable rage. Her mother, lapsed Catholic and famous actress Chris McNeil (Ellen Burstyn), takes her to a neurosurgeon and a psychiatrist, both of whom only seem to exacerbate her condition, which now includes a grotesque physical appearance and violent sexual acts. As a last resort, Chris enlists the help of Father Karras (Jason Miller) and Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow) to perform a traditional exorcism. The priests, convinced that a demon has possessed Regan, engage in spiritual warfare, resulting in Merrin's death at Regan's hands and Karras's self-sacrifice to expel the demon. The film's final image consists of a priest saying goodbye to Regan as she stares out the backseat of the family automobile, bearing physical scars but seemingly oblivious to the archetypal warfare waged over her body.

“It's Daring! It's Dashing! It's Downright Demonic!”

This question of Regan's memory carries with it a number of other, more weighty concerns: has Regan been completely cured? If cured, is she then exonerated? If exonerated, is she then innocent? If innocent, is she then a “child” once again? In that final epilogue, Chris greets Father Dyer outside their home as she loads up the car to begin a new life with her daughter. “She doesn't remember any of it,” Chris says. “That's good,” Father Dyer replies. Regan arrives, no longer dressed in her hospital blue, letting the audience know the examination is over, and upon seeing Father Dyer's Roman collar, she throws her arms around his neck and proceeds to give him a kiss on the cheek. Is Regan merely sensing Father Dyer's goodness, or is this the act of a grateful Regan thanking Father Dyer (and by extension Father Karras, Father Merrin, and the whole

Catholic church) for exorcising the demon? Is this a knowing Regan, one who not only remembers the events but has lied to her mother about that knowledge? The film remains ambiguous. As she leaves, the camera lingers on the sedan and the young girl inside—like the close of *The Omen* and the original theatrical ending to *The Bad Seed*, the child's face remains horrifyingly unreadable, possibly containing, still, a wealth of inappropriate knowledge within. The issue of Regan's memory would become a major issue four years later in the follow-up movie *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, which advertised itself with the tagline "It's four years later... what does she remember?" If the exploitative draw of the original film is the promise of seeing a damaged child—one who speaks and act in ways that a child should not—then the promise of the second film is that this damage was irreversible. In "what does she remember?" the film covenants with the audience for the return of the repressed.

However, in a way that binds star persona and star role, audiences and fans were more interested in what actress Blair remembered from her filmmaking experience. In much of the media culture surrounding the film, Regan and Blair became inexorably linked, due in no small part to the manner in which the film was promoted. Through the production phases and well into the film's release, for instance, the Warner Bros. Studio actively promoted the illusion that Blair herself spoke the words on the film's soundtrack and engaged in all of the acts depicted on screen.⁶ Indeed, a major draw of the film was the exploitative value of seeing a child utter the unutterable—much more so within the context of its 1973 release. Over the next three years, Blair would have three of the highest-rated TV movies of the decade. Indeed, audiences clamored to see Blair in three

modes of victimhood in her made-for-television movies: Blair portrayed a detention center rape victim in *Born Innocent* (1974), a self-destructive alcoholic in *Sarah T. – Portrait of a Teenage Alcoholic* (1975), and a Stockholm Syndrome kidnap victim in *Sweet Hostage* (1975). Those same audiences, however, were less interested when Blair attempted to portray anything other than an exploited victim. In short, Linda Blair was haunted by the ghost of Regan McNeil.

This is not to say that the media did not attempt to exorcise Regan from Blair's star persona. That is to say, *some* of the media: as I will show, there is a significant gap between the way that Blair is portrayed in mainstream magazines and the way that she is portrayed in more fan-addressed and tabloid magazines. Side by side, these two sites of discourse utilize Blair's body in very different ways and offer, I suggest, two alternating ways in which we can read the film's pleasures. The mainstream press offers the dominant reading by reconstructing the narrative of *The Exorcist* as a "rescue" plot and ushering Blair down the developmental narrative towards heterosexuality while insulating her innocence. The fan discourse offers something different: a foothold into understanding the transgressive pleasures of the text, wherein Regan always still remembers and is held unrescued in an perverse state of possessive transgressive erotic power.

By and large, the mainstream magazines are interested in recuperation. They work emphatically to normalize and feminize Blair and to distance her as much as possible from (if not the character, then) the spectacle of Regan. Most revealing, they enact the ending of *The Exorcist*, in which Regan is released from her possession, removed from

the scene of trauma, and is given an amnesic alibi. In a 1977 *People Weekly* interview with Robin Leach to promote *The Exorcist II: The Heretic*, the article is littered with photos of Blair making a life outside of the movies: cuddling with her boyfriend, driving an RV, hugging her dog, and competing in an equestrian competition. Underneath a photo of her playing badminton, the caption reads: “The real Linda (*Exorcist*) Blair is happiest in her off-screen roles — accomplished horsewoman and girl-next-door.” In the article, Leach envisions eighteen-year-old Blair and her boyfriend, nineteen, in picket-fenced bliss, stating, “she and Ted act every bit the suburban couple, bowling, playing miniature golf, or ‘just stopping off at the bar with the gang.’”⁷

In a *Newsweek* article released only a month after *The Exorcist* premiered, the ambivalence concerning how best to recuperate Blair is displayed by a simultaneous appeal to her maturity and her innocence. In discussing her controversial role, Blair’s mother states, “I know Linda, and I know it wouldn’t bother her. She is very independent and capable.” The article continues, calling Linda a “level-headed, live-wire adult-child.”⁸ But only a few paragraphs later, Blair seems more child than adult when the article discusses her dialogue in the film: “Linda had to say all her lines. But she treated the obscenities as mere jargon, just like the Latin and the backwards sentences she also had to speak.” Now whether or not anyone believes that “Stick your cock up her ass you mother fucking worthless cocksucker” could be “mere jargon” to someone of any age is doubtful, of course. Blair seems to participate in her own infantilization, stating, “Billy Friedkin told me what to do and I just figured I’d get down there and do it... [i]t could have been about a girl eating a lollipop.”

In the July 1974 issues of *Seventeen*—“Young America’s Favorite Magazine”—the discerning reader will be pleased to find a glamorous Miss Linda Blair gracing the cover. The teaser, “our beauty makeover for *The Exorcist*’s LINDA BLAIR,” is opposite other enticements such as “MAKE IT! FALL FORECAST OF GREAT LOOKS to sew and knit from scratch to zap up clothes you buy” and “special section: SUPER PICNICS close to home.” By and large, this girl’s magazine seems interested in cultivating the skills of a homemaker (though an industrious one) rather than wallowing in “idle fandom.” On the cover, Blair’s face is made up with heavy, pouty lips, and her hair is softly draped along the sides of her face (a style which, we learn later, “minimizes [her face’s] roundness”). Inside, the article “Linda Blair Gets a New Image”⁹ shows Blair again in an even more demure pose. Reclining with her legs off to one side, Blair smiles at the camera and delicately places her hands in her lap. Her hair is up in loose tendrils, and her dress is a formless Grecian-style white gown with elbow-length sleeves and a separate skirt that drags at her ankles. On the next page, readers are treated to Blair’s transformation, complete with cosmetic products that they may also purchase. Only a few pages later, an article entitled “How Much Affection Should Two Girls Show?” cautiously details the dangers that “over-affectionate” female same-sex friendships can pose for socialization in the high school environment.¹⁰ If Blair’s makeover represented the recuperation from queerness, this article delineates the dangers of not toeing the line.

The tabloid magazines, however, are quite a different breed from their mainstream cousins. As opposed to the mainstream magazines’ obsession with recuperation and normalization, the fan magazines seem to revel in Blair’s perverse star

persona and, even more perversely, identify with it. In the September 1978 issue of *Rona Barrett's Gossip*, Blair is paired with the likes of Jodie Foster, Brooke Shields, and Tatum O'Neal under the banner headline "Have They Paid Too Much for Their Stardom?" Like Blair, these young actresses animated anxiety about their performances and the roles they performed—too sexual, too knowing, too adultlike for their innocent bodies. Inside, the magazine gives details on "the bedeviled Linda" and her latest "possession,"¹¹ a criminal charge for having amphetamines in her purse during a cocaine bust. The magazine clearly revels in the charges, comparing her possible prison sentence to the made-for-TV movie she had just released a few years back (in which she is gang-raped by lesbian inmates during her incarceration).

It is *16 Magazine*, however, that offers the most perverse and queer reader position. In an issue dedicated to male sex symbols such as Mark Hamill, Roddy McDowell, Freddie Prinze, Lee Majors, Donny Osmond, Vince Van Patten, and "Fonzie," the only female to be profiled independently is Blair. Most intriguing, however, is the advertisement for a "Linda - Exorcist - & Beyond Poster Kit" which readers can order for one dollar. The kit, created and distributed by *16 Magazine*, features a "Sensational" poster kit of "foxy Linda Blair & Exorcist pix."¹² Certainly queer possibilities abound in this configuration—as with much fandom, the line between desire and identification is quite permeable. What can be said is that the fascination with Linda Blair's star image, unlike the articles in *People* or *Seventeen*, is anything but normalizing. Even in its word choice, the advertisement chooses to take Blair "beyond" her cinematic role as Regan and meld the two into a commodified image of erotic and sacreligious

defiance. In the graphic that accompanies the advertisement, Blair's face is side-by-side with a charcoal drawing of a demon spewing blood. Both figures overlook what is assumed to be the body of Blair, splayed spread-eagle on a pentagram. As the advertisement says, "It's Daring! It's Dashing! It's Demonic—& It's Downright Devilish!" It should be noted that the image of the girl on the pentagram is taken from the Hammer horror film *To the Devil... a Daughter* (1976), one of many imitators that plumbed the more erotic undertones of *The Exorcist* without the pretense of "weighty" cinema. What is apparent in these fan texts is that the image of Blair offered something immensely empowered, sexual, profane, and enticing to the young female readers who simultaneously eroticized and identified with her image—a "fille fatale" (the fatal girl) on which to pin queerly erotic fantasies of power. The fan discourse surrounding Blair's image holds her in stasis, never cured or rescued, growing sideways and joining her with her more eroticized cousins.

Like the film itself, the Blair star image offers, for its perverse spectators, a blasphemous patron saint of the female body in revolt. I have to concur with the perverse, possibly queer readers of *16 Magazine*. Like them, I have always felt an affinity with the monstrous child. The thrill of the films, it seems, is the license that they are allowed to enact the transgressive desires that so many of us harbored as children, and for many of us also as adults. What, then, does this spectator response tell us about queer reading? Many critics have detailed the ingenuity of the queer spectator to ferret out and hoard pleasure from problematic texts: camp reading, cross-gender identification, formulating alternative histories and narratives. Elizabeth Ellsworth has noted the ways in which

lesbian spectators rejected the heterosexually recuperative ending of *Personal Best* and re-authored the narrative to privilege and centralize lesbian desire. I argue that this act of repurposing and transforming textual bodies is a hallmark of queer viewing.

A Coming of Rage Story

The cinema of revolting childhood, as I have noted, constitutes a *mise-en-scène* of desire through which certain emotive geographies can be explored. In chapter one, I explored the experiential resonance of masking and hiding for the queer spectator. For the perverse spectators who take pleasure in Rhoda's malignant acts, the film offers a possibility to "look backward," to borrow Heather Love's term for the defiant queer rejection of "development" and "progress,"¹³ and to imagine alternatives to a queer teleology predicated in trauma. In the phantasmogoric space of cinema, in disidentification with the revolting child, queer spectators can explore the pleasure of hiding and knowing—as with Rhoda, the cognizant, resourceful, and cunning adult within the body of a child. However if Rhoda is an animistic fantasy of the closeted child who is powerful by virtue of the secrets she withholds, then Regan is fantasy of the closet exploded and shattered into pieces. If Rhoda horrifies because she takes what should be external (and observable) and keeps it inside, Regan horrifies because she takes what should remain inside (bodily fluids, repressed desires, rage) and makes it external. Regan and her dangerous sisterhood animate the terror/pleasure of polydirectional rage and an unlimited potential for destruction.

Rage—that which, in John Rechy’s terms, makes the sexual outlaw—also makes the perverse child. “Queers, one observes, trail children behind them or alongside them,” notes Kathryn Bond Stockton, “as if they are wedded, one to another, in unforeseen ways. This interests me. But so does the seeming flip side of this axiom. Scratch a child, you will find a queer.”¹⁴ For the queer spectator, Regan and her fellow baby bitches from hell offer a more visceral (and possibly more radical) pleasure than Rhoda’s closeted power plays. For subaltern populations, rage is probably the least available emotion for expression. What avenues do queers have to express anger? Disgust? Revenge? Revolt? As the cultural insistence (often from within the movement¹⁵) upon normalization, positive representation, and/or victimhood generally forecloses these possibilities, the cinema of revolting childhood provides a space—in empowering the most disempowered of subjects—to imagine themselves as de facto children run amok. Creed’s reparative reassessment of the films central to this chapter offers a useful analog to the argument which has guided this dissertation as a whole: “[a]lthough representations of monstrous little women no doubt stems from phallogentric bias,” says Creed, “our daughters of darkness ironically have come to represent a fantasy, a potent symbol, of the way in which we, as adults, wish to remember what might have been.”¹⁶ This is no less true of queer spectators. Riling violently and successfully against a patriarchal and heteronormative social order, Regan and Carrie are charter members in Queer Kid Nation. Their repugnant riots become a Stonewall uprising. Foul-mouthed, spoiled and soiled, out of control: they are the Feral Children who will act out and “ACT UP.” These baby bitches are sexual outlaws—outside of the law, yes, but outside the grip of the

family as well, outside medicine and psychiatry, outside the church. They defy diagnosis and cure—knowing and eradication—for their queer perversity.

As I will demonstrate, the “possession” of Regan is a mere conceit to activate and hyperbolize the anger that Regan always already directs towards her mother, her potential father replacements, and the medical and religious patriarchal order that seeks to immobilize her. As such, demonic possession provides convenient amnesty for audiences to explore pleurably the transgressive potential of Regan’s body—with this remove, her child body is expressively and vengefully queer. Central in this film is *rage*—queer rage—tinged with blood, with shit, with cum, with pus, with vomit, with disease, with every other bodily abjection that the social order links to queerness—and turned upon their oppressors, saturating them in the disgusting volition of its own displaced aggression. For desire that has been repeatedly and systematically demonized by the agents of heteronormative order, perhaps the most pleasurable response is to join with the forces of hell and wage a hedonistically destructive war. And what better, what more pleasurable, agent than the child—the sacrilized bounty of the homophobic order? Therein lies the perversely queer pleasure.

The Exorcist certainly has no shortage of critical work attached to it; partially due to its hyperbolic structure, it has been viewed as a misogynist indictment of working mothers, an anxious response to student political protests, a historical artifact verifying the presence of capital “e” Evil, a Nixon-era loss of innocence allegory for the nation, the disillusionment of the American public with Positivism, the projection of anti-Islamic anxieties, or a Catholic call to arms against liberal humanism.¹⁷ Most common are those

critical treatments which analyze the film as a culturally authored narrative which mirrors the political/religious mindset of the nation—assuming first that a national subjectivity is coherent, and second that the film itself is coherent in its treatment of the social issues. My interest does not lie with any of these interpretations. I respectfully suggest that they are all potentially useful lenses for deriving meaning from the text but ones that, for me, invest an undue amount of power in the perceived intentionality of the author(s). While I find Blatty and Friedkin’s authorship and multiple attempts at explanation intriguing, I am more provoked by their impassioned attempts to control the meaning of the film, as both consistently describe the film as a Catholic fable of rescuing innocence from evil.¹⁸

What is often neglected in any discussion of the film is the act of experiencing *The Exorcist*—few critics have engaged the manner in which spectators have been drawn to, impacted by, or have made meaning out of the film. Indeed, given the lore surrounding the original theatrical audience of *The Exorcist*, any consideration without attending to the horror/pleasure/embodyedness of the film seems incomplete. Upon its release the day after Christmas in 1973, the media became saturated with reports that audience members experienced any number of psychological and physical maladies upon viewing the film: vomiting, urination, blackouts, panic attacks, seizures, nightmares, and even miscarriages were attributed to the visceral horror of the film. Perhaps not since the days of William Castle’s movie house gimmicks or Alfred Hitchcock’s “fill and spill” audience discipline for *Psycho* had a film become such a movie-going *event*.¹⁹

This piece engages the film not in terms of political allegory but rather in terms of how the film manages its monstrosity in terms of gender and queerness. Of those who

have approached *The Exorcist* through the lens of gender and sexuality studies, Carol Clover's indispensable horror film analysis *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* stand out. Clover's discussion of the female adolescent body in *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* as a site of vulnerability and Creed's analysis of the abject female body in the horror film serve as a critical subtext for this chapter. Indeed, in reanalyzing both *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* as narratives of eruption and containment of female power, Clover opened the door for my reconsideration of the perverse spectatorial economy of *The Exorcist*. By addressing the "perversity" of both spectacle and spectator in *The Exorcist*, I will draw upon, and diverge from, this framework to form my argument.

Critics William Paul, Neil Sinyard, Kathy Merlock Jackson, and James R. Kincaid all address the film, in one way or another, in terms of its construction of childhood. Unilaterally, they deem the film intensely pedophobic: as Sinyard puts it, "[i]t is aimed at an adult audience, which is invited to be entertained or gripped by the visual spectacle of a child's suffering."²⁰ For his part, Paul keys in on the particularity of Regan's possession, which he says would be better described as a *regression*: "she can't control her bladder, she says words she isn't supposed to, she spits up her food, and she sticks objects in her vagina."²¹ Paul describes this regression to an infantile state as the single working mother's ultimate guilt-ridden nightmare: the terror of a demanding, ungrateful child who has taken over her mother's life.

Both Clover and Creed have honed in on the gender politics of the film by noting the ways it constructs the female adolescent body as a site of abject horror. The bodies of

Regan and Carrie are deemed dangerous in their liminality—on the cusp of womanhood, knowledge, and sexuality. As Creed notes in “Baby Bitches,” the adolescent female body in horror narratives exists as a sort of border-dweller, “crossing the divide from childhood to womanhood, their bodies are changing from a pre-fertile to a reproductive state.”²²

This budding sexuality is hyperbolized as an outwardly-directed violent rage and made monstrous through its articulation in the visual spectacle of bodily fluids: Regan pissing and spewing vomit, Carrie covered in blood—a perverse externalization of her own menstruation. Indeed, menstruation becomes the site of their horror (that which should remain *inside* has come outside) and their preservation as innocent subjects. As Clover notes, menstruation serves to mark the adolescent female body as open, vulnerable, and subject to invasion—literally, in the case of *The Exorcist*, and as an eruption of uncontrollable power within, as in *Carrie*. Both films additionally infantilize their subjects, dislocated from the internal workings of their own body and ignorant to the forces that have overtaken their bodies. Sabine Bussing refers to this formation, even more prominent in horror fiction, as the “evil innocent.” Says Bussing, the innocent child driven to violent and perverse acts “makes the reader feel pity—especially if there are intervals between its evil outbursts during which the child behaves ‘normally.’ It is a vessel for unnatural powers, and, while in their grip, is allowed to commit the vilest of crimes without really arousing antipathy.”²³

As such, Regan and Carrie become overdetermined sites of monstrous victimhood, power, transience, sexuality, and innocence. Patriarchal power is both the solution to the “female trouble” (as horrible things happen in its absence) and

horrifyingly impotent within its grasp. In this, the films are intensely gynophobic and violently pedophobic. I would add to this that *The Exorcist* is also immensely homophobic, as queerness is used as one of several profane signposts that mark Regan's descent into abjection. At her worst, the revolting child is an unholy trinity of masochistic, incestuous, and lesbian desire, rubbing her mother's face in her lacerated vagina.

And yet none of these pieces come close to articulating my personal reaction to the film—the transgressive pleasure I glean while acknowledging its problematic elements. In their consideration of queer reading practices, Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman ask if certain texts or certain genres open spectators to the possibility of a polymorphous or oppositional reading strategy. As they ask, “[w]hat exactly does it mean for a text to encourage ‘polymorphous identifications’ and how do we recognize the characteristics of such a text? Do some texts discourage queer viewing?”²⁴ While I do not consider any genre or text “off-limits” to queer reception practices, I argue that horror and specifically the cinema of revolting childhood encourage queer reading by trafficking in the emotive terrain of queerness—perversity, closetedness, pathology and origins, expulsion from the familial, and most succinctly here—rage. *The Exorcist*, like *The Bad Seed*, manufactures a dangerously perverse reading position while it simultaneously attempts to define those identificatory zones as unlivable. It is usefully paranoid to identify these homophobic, racist, gynophobic, and pedophobic practices. It is this question, of how queer readers make sense of texts (often texts that seem to foreclose any consideration of queer pleasure), which continues to guide this analysis. Such a critical

strategy moves beyond the defensive—beyond vulnerability and victimhood—and towards a celebration of the creative and the transformative. The revolting children in this dissertation would no doubt approve—so powerful and so dangerous that they are in their imaginative capacity. In my own mind, I think of this as an “and yet…” reading—my I-see-that-this-is-problematic-and-yet-I-find-pleasure reading.

In this chapter, I engage a set of “and yet” readings, ones which locate intense erotic and transgressive pleasure in the star image of Blair, *The Exorcist*'s young actress. Here Blair intermingles with other sites of young female desire in these texts and serves as a nodal point for locating multiple, fluid, and contradictory sites of engagement with the text. As such, I examine the way in which the public commentaries articulate Blair's body as a means of re-navigating the narrative of *The Exorcist*. As such, Blair serves as a transfer point for anxieties about childhood, queerness, innocence, exploitation, and the film industry.

In the extratextual discourse, mainstream texts followed the dominant reading of the film and sought to rescue Blair from the abjection of *The Exorcist*. Appealing simultaneously to both discourses of the professional/adultlike proto-adult and the unknowing/innocent child, they attempt to insulate Blair from any threats to normative development. In fan magazines, however, a different—and very queer—reading strategy emerges that revels in her erotic and unchildlike situation. For these readers, Blair is irrevocably transformed by her experience—damaged and powerful, sexual and powerful, never quite freed from the delicious sacrilege of her possession. I take this second set of responses, in their recalcitrance and fecundity, to reread the text from

“outside” in. By taking seriously the use of Blair’s image, we can uncover in the film a queer reading position based in perversion that identifies with the revolting child and revels in the destruction of the heteronormative family at the hands of its own hideous progeny. Indeed, I would echo Evans and Gammon’s belief that “the preferred heterosexual reading [can be] destabilized”²⁵ through the recalcitrance of queer reading practices. Much like the cultural repurposing of *The Bad Seed* through the practice of camp, disidentification with Regan/Blair’s body in fan practices against the forces of oppressive heteronormativity has replaced the dominant reading of the text as Catholic fable—if, indeed, such a reading was ever primary. As a property, 2000’s re-release of *The Exorcist*, under the banner “The Version You’ve Never Seen,” promised audiences the pleasure of *more* child perversity, not more rescue. If the queer pleasure of the horror genre is to be located in its potential for rebellion and destruction of normativity, then indeed the revolting child may be its most potent metaphor.

Revolting Body/the Body in Revolt

Though I use the term “revolting child” to refer to all of the monstrous/evil/bad children in this dissertation, perhaps none is more befitting the totality of that title than Regan McNeil. The phrase is modified from Paul’s book *Laughing Screaming*, in which he turns on the phrase “revolting bodies” to describe a certain subgenre of horror that involves the grotesque body (*Alien*, *Carrie*, any number of Cronenberg films). The cleverness of the phrase comes from its duality, referring both to the spectator relationship (“I find that body revolting”) as well as to the spectacle of the grotesque

body (“My body is revolting against me”). In my hands, the term “revolting child” refers to both the spectator relationship (in representing the categorical impossibility of the unchildlike/queer child) and the act of revolution against a heteronormative and patriarchal/paternal power (or, as will become more central later—the future against the present/past). In the case of the adolescent possession film, however, this notion of bodily control and abjection—the girl whose body seems to revolt against her—becomes additionally prescient. In *The Exorcist*, the body in revolt functions to define Regan as an abject spectacle, disgusting in her transgressive perversity and yet insulated from blame as a innocent taken over by demonic forces. In defining Regan as “abject” in her possessed state, I draw upon Creed’s application of Julia Kristeva in her analysis of bodily horror that centers upon the female body. Mary Douglas navigates similar territory—though from an anthropological rather than psychoanalytic perspective—in her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. As she notes, pollution and uncleanliness taboos are primarily the means by which a society orders a chaotic world and maintains the structure of hegemonic power from one generation to the next.²⁶ I recall Elizabeth Grosz’s work on the “intolerable ambiguity” of non-normative bodies²⁷ and Noël Carroll as well, who noted that monsters fascinate and repel because they are “categorically impossible beings” which threaten our ability to cognitively order our world—they are, as he notes, “a threat to common knowledge.”²⁸ I include, also, what Judith Butler says of the abject: “the abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the

sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.”²⁹ Queerness is, of course, one of those “unlivable” zones—doubly so when asked to be conjoined with the body of a child. Given that the queer child is a foreclosed subject within existing zones of social life—the queer is not “queer” when s/he is a child, the child is no longer a “child” if s/he is determined to be queer—they remain a categorical impossibility, a threat to common knowledge.

These critics and their work serve as the implicit architecture of this chapter. For *The Exorcist*, I draw upon and expand their analysis to suggest that the putridity, the decay, and the flow of bodily fluids from the young girls all represent what the symbolic order (here represented by the medical and religious professions as well as the family) seeks to reject and repress in order to maintain its stability and coherency. Regan is a liminal creature who violates the borders that define subjectivities: she exists between the binaries of human and inhuman, living and dead, female and male, innocence and corruption, childhood and adulthood. Regan becomes abject in other ways as well: in her analysis of *The Exorcist*, Creed hones in on the terrible openness of Regan’s body but neglects to mention that the demon threatens not just to transverse the borders that define common knowledge, but it breaks down the boundaries of the subject itself. “Where’s Regan?” Karras asks in his first meeting with the demon. “In here, with us,” Regan replies. “Your mother’s in here with us, Karras, would you like to leave a message? I’ll see that she gets it.” In the scene which follows, Father Karras discusses Regan’s condition while staring at an illustration of Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, and the motif becomes clearer: in a clever rewriting of the fairy tale, the demon/Wolf swallows up

souls, including that of Regan/Red Riding Hood and, it would seem, Karras's dead mother as a stand in for Red Riding Hood's grandmother. In keeping with the fairy tale narrative, possessed Regan even takes on Karras's mother's voice to trick Karras during the exorcism ritual. Like Creed's "archaic mother," the demon is an all-devouring vaginal abjection, a gaping maw "threatening to incorporate everything in its path."³⁰ Indeed, Regan seems to exist quite literally inside the wolf's belly, as the words "help me" appear scratched on her stomach during one of Karras's later visits. As such, Regan is not "invaded" by a foreign object; rather, the beast has swallowed her whole and suppressed her soul into its belly, awaiting the Woodsman to release her from consumption.

It is within this framework that the sexual danger of Regan's crisis finds its urgency. With each moment, Regan slides deeper into spaces more and more uninhabitable, her deviance marked by a descent into queerness and abjection, already linked in the popular imagination. With every new word and every new action, she threatens to be swallowed up and lost forever—it is in watching a child become potentially unrescuable from queerness and perversity that the film locates its greatest terror and its greatest thrill. Denotatively, the film uses lesbianism in the traditional horror film manner: to make the monster more monstrous, the threat more threatening, and the crisis more critical. In the film's most blasphemous scene, Regan stabs herself in the vagina with a crucifix while yelling "Let Jesus fuck you!" When her mother attempts to wrestle the bloody cross from her hands, Regan forces her mother's head between her legs and screams in a masculine voice "Lick me! Lick me!" It is a scene perfectly crafted for maximum perversity, transgressing no less than four social taboos in under thirty

seconds: masturbation, religious desecration, incest, and lesbianism.³¹ It is connotatively, however, in which we find the most engaging forms of queerness. This, of course, is nothing new for representations of queer sexuality. Speaking specifically about the horror film, Harry Benshoff notes that “homosexuality on screen has been more or less allusive: it lurks around the edges of texts and characters rather than announcing itself forthrightly... [it] becomes a subtle but undoubtedly present signifier which usually serves to characterize the villain or monster.”³²

The representations are “allusive,” certainly, but *elusive* as well. This is especially true for representations of lesbianism; as Terry Castle notes in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, “[t]he lesbian remains a kind of ‘ghost effect’ in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, hard to spot—even when she is there, in plain view... at the center of the screen.”³³ Like the discourse of child rearing itself, the spectre of lesbianism that haunts the borders of the text—it is the unspeakable foreclosure of indeterminate possibility. On Reagan’s body, where so much seems to be invested, one can see the traces of lesbian anxiety. Drawing upon images and descriptions found in art, literature, and medical pathology, Creed argues in “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys, and Tarts” that the portrayal of the lesbian body differentiates itself from the non-lesbian body in the reproduction of two different types: the masculinized lesbian body and the animalistic lesbian body. Reagan’s body is certainly made masculine in significant ways: she most obviously gains a gruff, butch voice courtesy of Mercedes McCambridge.³⁴ She also becomes aggressively sexual; she develops physical strength unavailable to a twelve-year-old girl; and perhaps most tellingly, she begins to urinate standing up. As Creed

notes, early theologians were increasingly anxious about the size of the tribade's (lesbian's) clitoris. I make no claims about the literal phallicizing of Regan, though I find it difficult to ignore her lengthy phallic tongue and her fairly explicit miming of cunnilingus. The animalistic lesbian body is represented as well: besides her obvious degeneration into an animalistic state, Regan frequently makes grunting noises in her possessed state and at one point even refers to herself as a "sow."³⁵ Here the danger of "pre-civilized" queerness aligns with attendant representations of childhood: the Child of Nature becomes dangerous when Romantic innocence is replaced with polymorphously perverse sexuality. Regan's evolutionary regression into a Feral Child is racialized as well, as the release of the demon in the Middle East underscores Regan's continuing flight from heterosexuality and white female innocence. Indeed, an evolutionary regression into a feral state is often accompanied with anxieties over an uncivilized pre-heterosexuality. 1957's *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, for instance, features a young man whose lycanthropic self is "released" by a queerly-coded psychiatrist and hypnotist who plumbs the depths of the young man's unconscious.

As I am writing this chapter, a friend sends me a link to a YouTube clip of a Connecticut church—the Manifested Glory Ministries—in which church elders perform a "gay exorcism" on the body of a sixteen-year-old young man.³⁶ In the ten-minute video copied to YouTube (church members subsequently removed the original twenty-minute video after a minor controversy), the pastor holds the convulsing teenager while a female church member can heard shouting "Rip it from his throat! Come on, you homosexual demon! You homosexual spirit, we call you out right now! Loose your grip, Lucifer!"

Later in the video, another church member can be heard yelling, "Come out of his belly! It's in the belly. Push!" Following this, the young man seems to spit (or possibly vomit) in a bag while someone says, "Get another bag. Make sure you have your gloves." The parallels with *The Exorcist* are fairly undeniable—the church, the youth supposedly “taken over” by queerness, the barely suppressed aggression, the conflation of homosexuality and the demonic, the place of queerness deep in his belly awaiting expulsion, the conflation of homosexuality and contagion, the release of queerness accompanied by some form of fluid and bodily abjection... the list goes on.

This, of course, is no isolated incident (a point underlined by many of the news reports which addressed the clip); rather “possession” and expurgation serve as the primary means through which queerness and adolescence become legible within religious and juridical discourses. Matt Hills refers to these as “para-sites” of horror, or places where horror is not seen to exist properly and yet still inform the field of representation for organizing experiences into generic formats.³⁷ More specifically related to queerness, Ellis Hanson has noted in his piece on cinematic representations of vampirism and their relations to AIDS paranoia, the relationship between cultural discourse and representation is not so simply unidirectional.³⁸ As often as culture affects the representational field, cinema provides a vocabulary for articulating the “real world.” As Hanson notes, the hedonistic, gaunt, life-sucking vampire became the primary means of representing the queer men in the advent of the AIDS crisis—particularly Patient Zero, saddled with the title of primary vector. Likewise, the innocent heterosexual teenager lost within a miasma of malignant desire is the primary organizing principle of heteronormative accounts of

queerness. In this, the “real” heterosexual is repressed/suppressed within the child, to be relocated and returned to control. Stockton refers to this as a type of death, when the gay child (though no longer a child) replaces the straight child, becoming an abject strangeness within the family: “the previously loved son or daughter suddenly seems to disappear from life and is replaced by a sinister version of the same person... the specter of ‘a stranger in the family,’ who, perhaps, was already haunting the family in shadowy form,” as she says.³⁹ Recall Regan’s mother who, in the midst of one of her child’s fits, screams, “That *thing* up there is not my daughter!” Before the grave marker is raised, however, there always stands chance of rescue from queerness—a ticking time clock of intervention and “reorientation” to the normative path. The temporarily queer teenager, victim of (as the story goes) a liberalized world or queer recruitment or unstable sense of selfhood, threatens to swallow up the straight child altogether, who is locked in stasis (innocence preserved) and awaiting reawakening.

Return of the Repressed Text

Robert Corber, in his work on the films of Hitchcock, has noted the ways in the director’s films often guide spectator positioning by aligning certain characters with queerness and perversity, therefore making them unavailable for identification and creating what Butler might call an “unlivable zone.” Likewise, *The Exorcist* ushers the spectator away from pleasurable identification with the possessed Regan by transforming her body into an incoherent, abject spectacle of queerness and perversity—it reduces the body of Regan to its to-be-looked-at-ness, its to-be-repulsed-by-ness. This identificatory

“corrall”-ing is necessary in the dominant reading of the text, in which we imagine the child divorced from her later demonic self and long for a return to the recognizable form that warranted our earlier identification. For the queerly-positioned spectator, however, there is a trenchant continuity between Regan the child and Regan the demon, and such identifications are not so easily transferred onto the agents of patriarchal power.

To examine the textuality of a queer/perverse spectatorship, I address the manner in which the film courts an oppositional spectatorship by focusing in on the parallel construction of two scenes. In the first, which I will call “the hospital scene,” Regan endures yet another battery of tests to diagnose her “condition.” The second, which I will call “the bedroom scene,” takes place immediately afterward in Regan’s bedroom.

In the hospital scene, the doctor pulls down Regan’s medical gown to her breasts and covers her in a light blue sheet. She continues to wear this exact shade of blue—reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, but perhaps more blasphemously to the secular crowd, Dorothy Gale—throughout the rest of the film, and through two costume changes. Indeed, this is one of the many ways in which the film demonstrates that Regan continues her “examination” long after she leaves the hospital. “Very sticky,” says the doctor as he swabs her neck with iodine. This scene, as with many moments early in the film, is thick with sexual innuendo, which later moves from double to single entendre.⁴⁰

The doctor then holds a phallic syringe at crotch level and pumps a bit of fluid out. “You’re going to feel a little stick here,” he says. “Try not to move.” The mobility of Regan’s body becomes a site of consistent concern as the film progresses. In this, the doctor’s request is later echoed by other patriarchal figures who literally jump on Regan’s

body, straddle her, restrain her, or beat her into submission to enact their examination. Indeed, the film resolves by delivering (with gusto!) the child battery that *The Bad Seed* could only grant in an off-stage electrocution. Indeed, if *The Bad Seed* fascinates desire by constantly promising child abuse, only to deliver it comically with a cinematic addendum, *The Exorcist* ups the ante, with Father Karras (a former boxer) literally pounding a twelve-year-old girl in the face—the final pedophobic pleasure masquerading as the final tragic rescue.

Somehow, though, I have jumped ahead and left poor unpossessed Regan back in the examination room, still strapped down to the gurney. Immobilized, the doctor slowly sticks the syringe in her neck and pushes down the plunger. He sticks a catheter directly into her neck, and both Regan and Chris cringe as blood spurts—coldly, clinically filmed—out of a hole in her throat. This sequence forecasts the upcoming abject possession scenes as Regan’s body emits a number of bodily fluids—mucus, vomit, more blood. The doctors then strap Regan to the bed (similar restraints will make an appearance later in the film). A catheter is then inserted, let me say it again, through *a hole in her throat* (Regan’s monstrous voice is another recurring anxiety) where presumably a dye is used to trace the blood flow in her brain. Regan is then placed in a MRI/CAT Scan machine (with the shadow of a crucifix on her forehead) that makes a terrible percussive noise, as if Regan herself were being struck repeatedly. Filmed in extreme long shot, Regan is alone and helpless as she screams out, seemingly in pain.

The scene is intensely graphic and uncomfortably visceral. What I find notable, however, is that the scene goes on for nearly five minutes and serves little narrative

function in the film. In this, Regan's second trip to the doctor, we learn essentially what we already knew: medicine has no answers, but they would like to run more tests. Indeed, the frivolity of tests, their prolonged execution, and their discomfoting invasiveness is quite aggravating. What I am suggesting, of course, is that the film cultivates an identification with the suffering body of Regan long before any overt signs of possession take place. What we must consider, therefore, is what becomes of that identification when Regan later becomes an abject spectacle.

In the scene that immediately follows, the doctors respond to the McNeil home: Regan's spasms have "gotten violent." When they reach Regan's room, they find her thrashing about, and they (again, as in the hospital) attempt to restrain her. Prone on her back, Regan's neck begins to swell to the size of a cantaloupe, as if in a delayed allergic reaction to the needles plunged into her throat in the preceding scene. (Recall the Connecticut gay exorcism, where church members yelled for the pastor to "rip the demon" from the young man's throat.) Regan then proceeds to kneel and hike her dress (light blue, of course, the same shade as the hospital sheet) above her waist. While staring at the doctors and thrusting her hips she yells, "Fuck me! Fuck me!" More than simply an act of shocking lasciviousness, the possessed Regan unmaskes and mocks the insidious underpinnings of the doctors' earlier work: the possession and penetration of her body by patriarchal power. Here we find another abjection—the demon girl takes what should be hidden and brings it to the surface. Indeed, the demon's most grotesque power seems to be the ability to reveal what Hanson calls "those illicit sexual possibilities that are already latent in the text in a more figurative and therefore more elusive and 'innocent' form"⁴¹—

like Castle's "elusive" lesbianism that haunts the borders of so many texts. Part Freud, part Foucault, part Butler—the devil, it seems, may be the best deconstructionist in town.

Indeed, these two scenes (one in the hospital, one in the child's bedroom) both chronicle acts of possession and acts of penetration. As I have noted, the penetration and medical possession of Regan's body in the hospital is just as bodily and just as visceral as the demonic possession that will occur later in the film. In addition to the hospital blue costuming, the restraints, the cross, and the obsession with Regan's voice/throat, both scenes of possession cause Regan to release bodily fluids: in the hospital blood from her neck and in the bedroom mucus and vomit. The essential difference between these two sequences is that the first occurs when Regan is under the complete control of the visible doctors: helpless, alone, and frightened. In the second, it is Regan (or "possessed Regan," though one begins to wonder at the distinction) who is paradoxically in control of her bodily emissions. By vomiting on the priest who seeks to exorcise her, she essentially re-enacts the scene of her earlier victimization with violent agency.

In this way, the priests who have come to rescue Regan become aligned with the medical profession which seemed so invasive and so impotent: their task, to diagnose and treat the girl, offers little distinction from the doctors who put Regan through test after test at the hospital. Says Chris when the doctors suggest an exorcism: "You're telling me that I should take my daughter to a witch doctor? Is that it?" By aligning these patriarchal institutions, the film clearly demarcates the battle lines: the structural force of containment promised by the medical and religious professions versus the abject possessed body of Regan.

Perhaps unintentionally, in its desire to manufacture empathy early on for the victimization of Regan, the film courts an oppositional, perverse spectatorship. And one begins to believe that the acts committed by the “possessed” Regan must in fact be fueled by the unconscious, repressed rage of Regan herself, riling against the heteronormative institutions of family, medicine, and religion that seek to pathologize her abnormality. From this perverse spectator position, then, the film becomes not a story of Regan’s rescue, but of her revenge.⁴² In this, the film equates the doctors and the priests with the demons, suppressing and controlling Regan’s body with patriarchal force. Paradoxically, it is only through possession that Regan is able to transgress and overcome patriarchal power, to turn its pathology against itself, and cover it with the putridity of queer abjection. Through possession, Regan/Blair becomes something more than an innocent girl, something more than endangered victim—she becomes, in the words of *16 Magazine*—“daring,” “dashing,” “downright devilish”... in a word, “sin-sational.” In her hyperbolic state, Regan is perhaps the most transgressive of revolting child: once possessed, she combines the Demon, the Destroyer, and the Feral Child in one foul-mouthed, enraged, manipulative, violent child body. It is perhaps she who brings the most malice to the wonderland of childhood representation, all the while using “possession” to dislocate her from the geography of childhood. In this, the conceit of possession offers a bounty of transgressive pleasures to explore onscreen and to entertain in the greater extratextual discourse. For these young female fans and other queerly-positioned spectators, demons may indeed be a girl’s (and a gay’s) best friend.

Raising Hell: Parental Rejection and the Possibility of Gay Adoption

The sign in the store window reads: “Closed so employees can be with their families for the holidays.” I stand outside in a light drizzle, wondering whether the rainy season will come early this year and pondering the assumption conveyed in that handwritten note: surely all employees must have families. A hackneyed image of “the older homosexual” comes to mind, alienated from relatives and living out his or her last years alone in some garret. The stereotyped tragedy of “gay life” revolves around this presumed isolation, the absence of kin and stable relationships. Walking paradoxes in a land of marriage vows and blood ties, lesbians and gay men are popularly supposed to incarnate this most sexual and least social of beings. Where does the store owner think his gay and lesbian employees go for Thanksgiving?

-- Kath Weston, *Families We Chose: Gays, Lesbians, Kinship*¹

In a point early on in *The Bad Seed*, as the adults discuss the moribund news of the day—including a serial killer named Bessie Denker—Christine Penmark voices her distaste for talk of violence. Visibly disturbed, she rises from her seat and says, “I’m afraid I shy away from reading about... such things.” This statement encourages Monica, the film’s resident Freudian and biggest dupe, to embark on a free association exchange

with Christine to reach Christine's "root anxiety." Eventually, Christine reaches a point where she discloses that she always felt as if she were an adopted child. "Oh you poor innocent darling," chirps Monica. "Don't you know that the changeling fantasy is the commonest of childhood? Why I once believed that I was a foundling—with royal blood!"

Later, however, this "commonest of fantasies" turns monstrous as Christine, struggling to understand the particular peculiarity of her little girl, begins to delve into her own childhood. As if under intense hypnosis, Christine recalls troublesome memories in snapshots and tearfully narrates that she is actually the daughter of Bessie Denker. "It's that terrible place and the evil woman!" screams Christine as she beats her fists against her abdomen, striking at her polluted uterus. Christine's horror is a per/inversion of the changeling fantasy—not the child's wish of corrected lineage, majestic legacy, or rescue from the drudgeries of the unexceptional. Christine's horror—soon realized—is that *she* is the bad seed, the polluted invader by proxy within an otherwise normal American household. Where Rhoda hides her monstrosity, Christine's monstrosity has been hidden from her. As the carrier of a diseased legacy, Christine's perverse child becomes the symptomatic manifestation of her own suppressed monstrosity. Recall the eponymous monstrous tots of David Cronenberg's *The Brood*, who exist only as physical manifestations of their mother's repressed rage. In its eugenic account, Christine and Rhoda are one in monstrosity, a point underscored by the silhouette portrait of mother and daughter that hangs on the living room wall. Like Christine and Rhoda, the portrait represents the two as one—a single black form, amorphous and undifferentiated. In

fusing mother and daughter in monstrosity, the film displaces its aggression towards Rhoda onto Christine, who beats at her uterus, shoots herself in the head, then claims that she has more suffering to do, saying “I’ve committed a dreadful, dreadful sin... And I know I’m going to have to pay for it some way.” Indeed, the film delivers Christine’s boundless culpability twofold: Rhoda is monstrous both by nature (a product of matrilineal psychosis) and by nurture (in a frightful homestead dangerously devoid of patriarchal authority).

As William Paul notes, one of the underlying suggestions in these films of maternal melodramatic horror is that “all-forgiving, unquestioning mother love is more monstrous than the monster it creates,”² a theme which certainly resonates in this period of Phillip Wylie’s venomous “Momism” tirades.³ In a related vein, Paul analyzes a sequence in *Night of the Living Dead* in which a mother, Helen, is unable to strike her zombified daughter, ultimately leading to the mother’s death. As in *The Bad Seed*, this maternal paralysis animates a similar transfer of spectatorial ire towards the unwillingly abusive mother. As he says, “Because Helen is the agent of that frustration [not hitting her daughter], our anger must inevitably turn against her. By refusing to give Karen [her daughter] what she deserves, Helen deserves what she gets.”⁴

Although one of the propellant desires of *The Bad Seed* is the hope that Christine will dislocate Rhoda from the familial and deliver physical punishment upon her, the film ultimately fails to deliver. In turning from “a child is being beaten” to “a mother being beaten (and shot),” the film attempts resolution by shifting sadism/horror into masochism/melodrama. Indeed, one of the structural tensions in the film is that Rhoda

cannot be removed or denied: she is product of the family—or more specifically, of Christine. If the film animates fantasies of child abuse, it suspends these hopes in stasis, leaving the audience unsettled and titillated with the promise of violent ends. Indeed, as the horror genre traditionally has a problem with containable closure, often the unspoken and the unexplored offer themselves up as true, but tragically unrealized, solutions. Child abuse signals a return to traditional, trusted methods in the face of effeminized parenting and paralyzing progressive child rearing practices.

In the cinema of revolting childhood, it is often only abuse that can set things right. The subgenre is littered with pedophobic opportunities to entertain a good old-fashioned child-beating—what is *Child's Play* (1988) and its bevy of doll-as-monster imitators but a barely displaced desire to see a child's body beaten, stabbed, and gruesomely incinerated? Woe be the parent who fails to toss the marauding doll-child (costumed exactly like her son!) into an open fire. If *The Exorcist* demanded brute masculine force to savage the demon out of Regan and return her to her former “true” self, then films such as *Orphan* or *The Good Son* (1991) figure sparing the rod as a failure of true parenthood—not so much spoiling the child (the child is preternaturally corrupted already, contagiously so) as spoiling the family unit itself, endangered by this incompatible presence. Other films in this chapter will explore fantasies of child abuse by Othering the child to an unreturnable degree—not children at all but aliens, animals, demons, and (perhaps worst) crazy Russian midgets. Over fifty years later, I would argue that *The Bad Seed* takes more risks with its infanticidal promulgation than these more

contemporary films by making the child so inarguably and inextricably *part* of the family.⁵

Compare this to *Orphan*, which retreads the iconography of *The Bad Seed* so distinctly as to deserve a writing credit, and we can see a marked shift towards more literal (but more alibi-ready) versions of child abuse. In *The Orphan* (the title itself centralizes the child's foreignness, xenophobically rendered by scripting adopted child Ester as a Russian immigrant), the narrative turns on the discovery that Ester is actually a developmentally stunted, mentally unstable middle-aged dwarf intent on replacing her adopted mother in an Elektra-complex nightmare. In preparation for the final showdown between mother and "fake" adult midget child (which has the innocent, deaf, helpless, "real" child in the balance), the film reveals, in detail, that Ester is not a child. Physically, Ester removes her make-up and slowly wrinkles and dark circles appear under her eyes. She removes dentures as well, showing the rotten teeth beneath. Finally, she unbinds her torso, revealing the presence of incompatibly unchildlike breasts. The camera then pulls back to reveal her room—bathed in blacklight, we can see the violent images painted in fluorescent hues on her childlike drawings. Underneath the drawings are large wall murals of men and women copulating—offering the film's final determination that Ester is not a child at all (after all). With inappropriate sexual knowledge, Ester is not only no longer a child, she is no longer possibly a childlike adult—her queer sexuality divests her of any further protections as her childlike body ends the film having been punched, stabbed, shot, drowned, and her neck broken as she drifts into a frozen lake. As in many of the changeling monstrosity films, Ester makes a last minute plea to save her life—

performing the innocent child and cooing “Mommy...” as she sinks into the frigid lake. Her adopted mother, no dupe, responds in staccato tones “You’re not my *fucking* daughter!” before delivering a final kick to the tiny Bolshevik’s face. The audience in my theater then erupted into a chorus of cathartic shouts, applause, and laughter.

In this chapter, I am interested in the writerly labor and the narrative acrobatics that must occur to legitimate parental anger, rejection, abandonment, disownment, and even physical battery. The films in this chapter most readily make what Paul calls “the case for child abuse.”⁶ Moreso, what machinations allow spectators to witness pleurably child abuse while disavowing its presence—attempting, perhaps, to have one’s kid and beat it too? This chapter asks what must occur for a child to be uninterpellated as “son,” “daughter,” or even “child” and considers what these excommunicated children mean for the queer spectator? Central to this chapter is trauma of child abuse. In chapter one, I explored the pleasure of the masked child, using the closet as a site of power. Chapter two examined the child possessed and transformed by queerness into something unrecognizable. If this dissertation follows a certain evolutionary logic from closetedness to outness, then this chapter follows that progression to its unfortunate and all-too-common next destination: parental rejection and abuse.

Of all the chapters in this dissertation, this one takes a most collective approach—perhaps in preparation for the final chapter about groups of children. This chapter is not as tied to a single text or a single case study as the previous chapters. As such, it will cull together seemingly disparate figurations—morose murdered toddlers, space-crafted Hitler

youth, Antichrist eight-year-olds, killer cyborg infants, and horrifying gay fetuses, to name a few. This makes for a disturbingly diverse day care unit. Though varied, I argue that these texts are drawn together loosely under a prevailing *mise-en-scène* of desire: the threat of parental rejection and the emotive experience of familial unbelonging. For many queer subjects, the very notion of biological “family” carries an attendant trauma of devaluation and expurgation—often the only means by which the familial maintains its integrity. As Leo Bersani notes, “the definition of the family as an identity is, inherently, an exclusionary process, and the cultural product has no obligation whatsoever to coincide exactly with its natural referent. Thus the family identity produced on American television is much more likely to include your dog than your homosexual brother or sister.”⁷ To accommodate these texts, the queer spectator must take on something less immediately cathartic than the abject rage offered by *The Exorcist*—rather the stories provide a narrative of loss and traumatic rejection, and the possibility of adopting the rejected child into a family of choice.

In varying degrees, these changeling nightmare films offer up conflicting pleasures: first, the dominant/heterosexual/parental, which is a pedophobic fantasy of legitimated child abuse disguised as heroic purgation; and the second, the oppositional/perverse/queer, which “looks backward” in melancholia or anger to find reparative pleasure in the parental struggle to manage their troublesome queer offspring. These abjected children provide a “strange dislocation,” as Carolyn Steedman says of the act of child gazing. Like the closeted child and the enraged child, the rejected child can locate “the loss that provides the aetiology of the self; the imagined child embodies the

loss and dislocation.”⁸ It is within this depressive position, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes of the power and recalcitrance of queer reading, that healing can begin. By adopting this position, indeed “adopting” these unadoptable children, perverse spectators can renavigate not just troublesome texts but troublesome personal histories.

There is, too, a pleasure of monstrous futurity. As these films deal explicitly with generational aggression and anxiety, they do so always already in a manner in which the revolting child represents something more than parental anxiety. As overdetermined objects, the child-as-monster is often an avatar of terrifying progress. It is no mere coincidence that *The Exorcist* intercut Regan McNeil’s possession with her mother’s production of a film about Vietnam-era student protests. Recall Lee Edelman’s queer polemic that called for a rejection of “reproductive futurism” and an embrace of “queer negativity,” which names “the place of the social order’s death drive.”⁹ Returning to the double meaning inherent in “revolting children,” the child in revolt in these films is anti-futurity, inasmuch as it represents a terrifyingly radical and unrecognizable future.

In the introduction, I mentioned the figure of the Wise Child that shames adult culture through its simple and unadulterated logic and wisdom. But the Wise Child represents both the promise and the horror of eugenic progress: seemingly born without adult pettiness and jealousy, the Wise Child can become the Alien when this generational difference transforms them into something unknowable, inaccessible, or uncontrollable. In *The Village of the Damned*, the alien children represent something intellectually superior and unstoppable; in *Demon Seed*, *The Unborn* and *It’s Alive*, the infants emerge as evolutionarily-advanced survivors; in *The Omen*, young Damien ushers in the

apocalypse flanked by an obscenely efficient cabal of followers. Indeed, the apocalyptic annihilation in *The Omen* is perhaps closest to the nihilistic, hyperbolic vision that Edelman favors—a new chaotic disorder that “sever[s] us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of *knowing* ourselves and hence of *knowing* our ‘good’.”¹⁰ This issue of monstrous, encroaching futurity will become central in the next chapter on groups of monstrous children. But even in this chapter, the children are a bit more fecund in their dereliction, bordering on something like contagion anxiety. In *The Unborn*, expectant mother Virginia (Brooke Adams) augurs a bleak omen of unproductive futurism, saying, “There’s this thing growing inside of me... it’s not my baby. There’s something wrong with the child. They’re doing something to them. They don’t belong to us anymore... they’re using us; they’re using our bodies. They’re eating us alive!” Thus parental failure—that is, the failure to abandon, beat, or murder one’s revolting child—threatens not just the personal and the familial, but the entire social order.

For my purposes here, I divide these texts into three categories: the *forlorn child*, in which a deceased child seeks acknowledgement; the *maternal gothic*, in which a mother gestates and births an alien presence; and finally, the *paternal gothic*, in which a father doubts his paternity and seeks to dispatch his bastard child. Together, these films offer a cartography of familial disassociation: some children adopted and returned to the family, some other children—“Othered” children—remaining forever foreign, and still others troubling the boundaries and coherency of kinship itself. If, as Bersani claims, “definition of the family as an identity is, inherently, an exclusionary process,” then this chapter considers which members can be interpellated into the family and which bodies

must be excluded to maintain its definitional and symbolic function. This chapter examines the machinery of erasure, exclusion, and alienation. Finally, what does it mean for these queer changeling bodies to be children, always already overdetermined symbolics of individual legacy and familial/national/racial futurity?

Changeling, the Family Romance

The “changeling,” as a Western European folklore figuration, extends back to medieval storytelling. In its most common form, a troll or elf would swap out a human child for one of its own offspring. The narrative engine behind these tales was the discovery and expurgation of the unwelcome, unnatural child and the restoration of the true human heir to its rightful place. Like many of the children in this dissertation, the “wrongness” of the invading child is evidenced in some traditions by its animalistic qualities (voracious appetite, hairy limbs) and in others by its heightened intellectual capacity—like the “too wise” child so often seen in these films.

In Freud’s theory of “the family romance,” however, the focus is not on the troll or elf changeling of folklore, but on the good “human” child taken away from her/his family. His is more of an animistic fantasy, possessed by all (“the commonest of childhood,” as Monica says), and in its imaginative labor is a child’s wish fulfillment for a better life. It is an affirmation, or reaffirmation of misplacedness—which is to say, specialness. As Freud notes in *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, this fantasy “serves the needs of self-aggrandizement”¹¹ and stands as one of the originary sites of imaginative recreation (in both senses: as daydreaming leisure and as a literal refashioning of the

self). Later in his work, Freud characterizes the family romance fantasy and the child's "fort-da" game as early acts of "imaginative activity" (such as artistic creation) that seek to order experience and reconcile pleasure and reality principles. Freud theorizes the family romance/changeling fantasy in two ways: one being the foundling narrative of cradle-swapping and the other being a child's fantasy of an illicit affair between her/his mother and a man of noble stature. The latter formation usually appears later, Freud notes, as a child's understanding of sexuality, kinship relations, and reproduction increase.

Drawing upon Freud's work, Ann Douglas writes in her piece "The Dream of the Wise Child: Freud's 'Family Romance' Revisited in Contemporary Narratives of Horror" that contemporary horror locates the family as a site of trauma, inevitably populated by a tortured triad: absent father, helpless mother, and demon child. Douglas extends Freud's theory by including the writing of Freud's student Sándor Ferenczi, in particular his work "the dream of a wise baby," in which he examines the drama of "the unwanted child" who demands parental affection in a scarcity economy. Of interest as well is Ferenczi's term "the confusion of tongues" between child and adult, as xenophobic crisis animates the dominant reading of these films. For Douglas, horror is an apt genre to explore this confusion of tongues and the complexity of parent/child relations, as it "eerily reinterprets and rearranges, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not, what Freud called the 'family romance,' the Oedipal grouping and interaction of parents and child."¹² Indeed, horror provides ample vocabulary to name the peculiarity of recognition/misrecognition that occurs from parent to child, as well as the semiotic dissonance of children

functioning as both signifiers of our past selves (nostalgia) and our coming progression (futura). As Douglas notes, “to use Freud’s terms in describing the uncanny, the horror of families’ domestic relations is that they can neither be escaped (they are *heimliche*) nor resolved (they are *unheimliche*).”¹³ I pick up where Douglas leaves off to explore (though less psychoanalytically) the troublesome presence of the unwanted child.

A Typology of the Changeling Narrative

As this chapter deals with immensely disparate texts, I offer a basal structure to give them a more concrete connection. This will aid my discussion of the texts and quiet my more anal-retentive impulses, which generally seeks to order the whole of life into a series of charts. I foreground the chart on the narrative elements of the films here, but I will be referring to it throughout the chapter. In each of the rows is one of seven of major or representative texts that I discuss in this chapter, and in each of the columns is a narrative element relating to the film’s management of child monstrosity and abuse. The first column is the parent’s relationship to the child as it is ultimately revealed,¹⁴ the second is the film’s central crisis as it relates to the child as futurity, the third is how the film proposes that the family manage monstrosity (abuse or integration), and the fourth is the success or failure of that solution vis-à-vis narrative closure.

	Relationship	Crisis	Solution	Closure
<i>Orphan</i>	Not my child	The future is revealed to be the past	I must destroy the past	Closed
<i>The Changeling</i> (Forlorn)	Not my child, though I wish he were	The past is disrupting the present	I must repair the past	Closed

<i>Demon Seed</i> (Maternal)	Not my child, but in my body	The future will consume the present	I must destroy the future	Open
<i>The Twilight of the Golds</i> (Maternal)	My child, though I wish he weren't	The past will occur again	I must accept the future and the past	Closed
<i>It's Alive</i> (Paternal)	My child, though I wish he weren't	The future will consume the present	I must accept the future	Open
<i>Village of the Damned</i> (Paternal)	Not my child	The future will consume the present	I must destroy the future	Closed
<i>The Omen</i> (Paternal)	Not my child	The future will consume the present	I must destroy the future	Open

The Forlorn Child

As it bears the name of one of the foci of this chapter, the horror film *The Changeling* is a sensible place to start. In the 1980 film, George C. Scott plays John Russell, a tortured composer and music professor who purchases an abandoned mansion in Seattle after the death of his wife and son in a car accident. As he learns, however, he is not alone in his grief—rather, the spirit of a mysteriously murdered young boy occupies the house, lashing out at the unfamiliar new resident. The spirit manipulates John's grief over his son's death, and John uncovers that the child—a sickly and handicapped young boy—was murdered by his father and replaced with a healthy orphan to secure the strength and potency of the family line. With his family's wealth and privilege, the healthy boy has gone on to be a Washington state senator and government

power-broker. Upon the revelation of his false past, however, the senator suffers a heart attack, and the sickly spirit's soul is released.

The eponymous “changeling” of the film actually functions on two levels: one is the nefarious substitution that occurred in the past—the original site of trauma that has created the spectral rage. The second, however, is the exchange of John's dead son for this forlorn ghost child. For a good portion of the film, the spectator is led to believe that the ghost actually is John's dead son, particularly when the spirit plays with the child's toys (sending a ball down the stairs in the film's most memorable sequence). In this, John is able to work through his guilt over abandoning his wife and child and “causing” their death by rescuing another child. The film employs doubling and splitting quite freely, as John becomes the good/true father to the murdered boy while at the same time revealing the truth of kinship relations and retroactively punishing those who would falsify blood ties. Indeed, this figuration, which I will refer to as “the forlorn child,”¹⁵ is a consistent trope in the horror mystery genre. In these films, a dead child haunts the living and inspires them to uncover the circumstances of the ghost's death. The horror of the genre springs from the unsettling omnipresence of the spirit, or in some cases, the spirit's displaced aggression, especially onto figures of parental authority.

The aforementioned *The Changeling* functions as a sort of ur-text for the figuration, but as early as 1963 the film *The Haunting* suggested terrible abuse at the hands of patriarch Hugh Crain upon his children, who in turn seemed to desire Eleanor (Julie Harris) as their new mother at Hill House. Further, more recent films like *The Sight* (2000), *Ghost Ship* (2002), and *Gothika* (2003), *The Grudge* (2004), *Dark Water* (2005),

Séance (2006), and *The Orphanage* (2007) all feature other substitute parents who care for these abandoned children as their own and pay penance for their own parental failures in the act. Indeed, surrogate parents abound in these films. Just as often, however, the films center on youth approximately the age of the deceased spirit, and it is s/he who unlocks the mystery and frees the forlorn soul. The living child stands in as the active agent for the deceased child, a doppelganger who enacts where the dead child cannot. Notable examples of this dead/living child doubling include *The Other* (1972), *Amityville Horror* (1979), *The Shining* (1980), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Stir of Echoes* (1999), *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), *The Ring* (2002), *The Eye* (2008),¹⁶ *A Haunting in Connecticut* (2009), and *Lovely Bones* (2009). The film *The Ring* plays with this formula, as Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts) goes to extreme lengths to release the soul of murdered child Samara (Daveigh Chase), only to discover that she has unleashed her fury instead. *The Ring* perhaps makes the best “case for child abuse” in any revolting child film, as the film argues that Samara, murdered by her mother and tossed down a well, is best contained in the dank solitude where Rachel discovered her remains. To “right” the past, as John does in *The Changeling*, is truly to unleash her unchecked fury upon the world.

This figuration as a whole, however (unlike the films that follow), distances itself from the spectre of child abuse. These forlorn children, truly the “lost” children, are rescued from abuse and restored into the patriarchal order—adopted by more fit parents or ushered into maturity by their more contemporary doppelgangers. Their discovery is their release from the miasma of unknowingness. They work to reassert the ascendancy of the present over the past—abuse, neglect, trauma... all terrible things happened in the

past. For all of the terrors committed in the past, parental love is ultimately recuperated in the forlorn child narrative—the family may be the problem (generations ago), but the family is also the solution (today, forever forward). The contemporary parents assume the righteous mantle of surrogacy, achieving what the past could or would not. The frail child, the sickly child, the injured child—these are the figurations of the forlorn children of cinema. Shuttled off to the margins, battered and abused, rejected and abjected—they are recuperable because, despite their tantrums or their late-night wailing, they are victims.¹⁷

As discovered again and again with child monsters, their horror lies in the incompleteness—their lack of narrative conclusion. To rescue them, their parental avatars must complete their story—child angry and alone must become child abused and silenced. In restoring transparency, the Alien becomes the Wise Child, as her/his tantrum is now understood as the product of abuse and neglect. Though mischievous and sometimes violent, the ghost child is a Trickster, not a Demon—s/he calls out for attention but does not transgress social and sexual taboos. The Trickster child cries out to restore familial bonds, not to rip them asunder. The polydirectional, destructive rage that so terrified in *The Exorcist* now has the two essential elements that were absent in Regan McNeil: a rational cause and a permanent end. Significantly, these forlorn children are ghosts—resonating echoes of past physical violence that conveniently evaporate from the scene once the mystery is solved. Though “adopted,” they need nothing so messy and complicated as true accommodation within the family. In completing the narrative of victimization, the child is regranted innocence as well. Completed, not a revolting child at

all (after all), the child can be a “child.” More sinned against than sinning, the forlorn child is resacrilized as The Innocent (not the anxiety-producing Watcher), as its victimhood and untimely death insures that the borders of inappropriate knowledge were not broached. As such, it can re-enter the symbolic order, no longer a threat to its categorical imperative. Further, the forlorn child assumes the mantle as the dead innocent child—defiled and yet pure—becoming that most prized and potent child symbolic of all. Dead innocent children fascinate desire because, like the Lost Boys of *Peter Pan*, they are “frozen forever before they could betray us by growing up.”¹⁸ Or growing sideways.

These are the easily adoptable cherubs of revolting childhood. Absent, abducted, abused, or abandoned... the lost child figures as one of the emotionally overdetermined and politically efficacious symbols in modern social and political discourse. The drama of the lost child—ripped asunder from the familial, returned to its bosom—carries a leadened melodramatic weight of deprivation and incompleteness. Its return marks the completion of a circle, the promise of a hallowed futurity, or the cathartic release of parental guilt. Not all children are so easily accommodated, however. Some are “difficult placements” in the words of Child Protective Services. In the 2007 Spanish film *El Orfanato [The Orphanage]*, Laura (Belen Rueda) and her husband plan to reopen an orphanage for sick children—inspired by their adopted child, Simon (Roger Princep), who is HIV-positive. After Simon disappears, the former dead children of the orphanage haunt the grieving Laura, imploring her to discover the circumstances of their murder. In the film’s surprisingly sentimental conclusion, Laura discovers her son’s lifeless body

and decides to kill herself to become the eternal caretaker of these forgotten and forlorn children.

I find the conclusion of *The Orphanage* to be an especially potent metaphor for what I call the possibilities of gay adoption. Given the paranoia that erupts whenever queerness and childhood occupy the same discursive territory, it is no surprise that instances of adoption of children by gay couples are given low priority, summarily denied, or banned outright. More often, gay and lesbian couples adopt (by choice or circumstance) “difficult placements”: at-risk youth, physically or mentally disabled children, abused children, adolescents and teenagers, or, like Simon in *The Orphanage*, HIV-positive youth. Perhaps there is some sort of allegiance with these triaged youths—last chosen at the kickball game, last chosen at the orphanage. Or more concretely, the disproportionate numbers of gay youths in runaway shelters across the country speaks to the very real correlation among youth, queerness, and parentlessness. To speak of rejected youth is often to speak quite literally of queer youth—repudiated by the old family and repugnant to the new one. The remaining children of this chapter are not so easily adopted, except, I argue, by the perversely queer spectator. Children such as Damien in *The Omen* or the eponymous youth of *It’s Alive* noticeably trouble this wholeness. Hard-edged, ugly, extrinsic, they do not complete the familial circle. They are the apotheosis of “misfit” children. This chapter is distinctly concerned with these lost children, who are really abandoned children—erroneously contracted to the family, or too horrific to be called “my child,” they are not so much taken away as they are pushed away. I return to Elizabeth Grosz’s notion of “intolerable ambiguity” to consider those

children which are unadoptable and have no place within the system of kinship. More troubling, they have no place within the discursive formation of childhood. Unable to be restored to the symbolic order, the truly lost children of this dissertation desire and demand inclusion but remain incompatible. These are uncanny bodies that throw the family into disunity. Queerly bodied, they represent a terrible and unrecognizable futurity that must be abjected, abused, or annihilated.

The Maternal Gothic

In 1968, Roman Polanski released his sixth film, a hugely successful adaptation of Ira Levin's modern Gothic novel *Rosemary's Baby*, to mixed critical acclaim. In the film, young mother Rosemary (Mia Farrow) slowly discovers that she has been impregnated by a Satanic cult and will bear the son of the devil. Notable for its extreme paranoia and claustrophobia, the film offers Rosemary no reprieve as her husband, her neighbors, her friends, and even her doctors seem involved in a vast conspiracy to circumscribe her autonomy. The film closes with Rosemary staring at her demonic child, noting the inhuman qualities of its body ("What have you done to him? What have you done to his eyes, you maniacs!"), and slowly acceding to maternal responsibility as she cradles her deformed and demonic offspring.

Reviewers for the film honed in on Farrow's portrayal of Rosemary in particular, often praising her acting talents and simultaneously abhorring her infantile, suffering character. Writing for *The New Yorker*, reviewer Penelope Gilliat referred to the film derisively as a base exercise in exploitation that wasted Polanski's skill and sophistication

on what she deemed “[a]n exercise in Gynecological Gothic.”¹⁹ Indeed, *Rosemary’s Baby* calls to mind any number of endangered Gothic heroines who have been ensnared by patriarchal authority. Most notably, the film recalls the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,”²⁰ infantilized by her husband and driven to fits of madness by a patriarchal medical establishment that deems her “hysterical.” In the cinema of the maternal gothic, inaugurated by Polanski’s film, the womb is a contested terrain, and the pregnant female is beset both from without and from within. She finds herself alone against a conspiratorial establishment which seeks to control the reproductive function of her body, and she is simultaneously convinced that her unborn child is somehow not her own, its monstrosity apparent by the manner in which it displays an independent sentience that (in the more sci-fi incarnations) subsumes her will as well.

Rosemary’s Baby is certainly not the first film to play upon parental anxieties or to figure the child as a site of alienation. There is even a case of village-wide alien impregnation in the 1960 British film *Village of the Damned* which gives rise to a cabal of eerie psychic children out to conquer the Earth. This film, however, only represents the children at a toddler age. Indeed, the monstrous infant or fetus as a preoccupation of the horror genre seems to emerge in the cinematic landscape with the 1968 release of *Rosemary’s Baby*, and following *It’s Alive!* (1974), other films continued to explore the maternal gothic in such films as *I Don’t Want to Be Born* (1975), *Embryo* (1976), *Eraserhead* (1977), *Demon Seed* (1977), *The Manitou* (1977), *Progeny* (1979), *The Brood* (1979), *Alien* (1979), *Humanoids from the Deep* (1980), *Inseminoid* (1981), *Xtro*

(1983), *The Fly* (1986), and *The Unborn* (1991). In these films, the unnatural birth is generally attributed to supernatural or fantastic causes, including rape by demonic forces (*Rosemary's Baby*), artificial intelligence (*Demon Seed*), or inhuman/alien entities (*Alien*, *Humanoids from the Deep*, *Inseminoid*, *Xtro*, *The Fly*); possession by ghosts (*The Manitou*, *I Don't Want to Be Born*); or mad science run amok (*Embryo*, *The Brood*, *The Unborn*).

The political ideologies of these films vary wildly; however, what remains consistent is the manner in which the female body is in some way invaded or corrupted by external forces to create an unnatural monstrosity. In keeping with the structure of the invasion genre, the arbiters of medical, legal, and familial authority dismiss witness/mother, deeming her “hysterical” and prone to fantasy or paranoia.²¹ In the vast majority of these films, the pregnant protagonist is witness to her own bodily invasion and yet quelled into self-doubt by patriarchal authority. Indeed, forces are continually at work to immobilize the mother, hyperbolizing the childbearing rhetoric that favors docile, inert bodies and mirroring the shift from midwifery to medical surveillance in the field of natal care. This formation finds its most exaggerated form in *Demon Seed*, wherein Proteus, an artificial intelligence, rapes and impregnates Susan (Julie Christie) and traps her within her home until the cyborg fetus comes to term. Isolated and infantilized, the beleaguered heroine often finds herself at the mercy of her unborn child as well, whose survivalist will supersedes her desire to sever the parasitic bond between them. When the female body is not invaded externally in the maternal gothic, the unborn child is a symptomatic manifestation of societal ills in which the child, so overdetermined

as the harbinger of a better, brighter future is refigured as the manifestation of a devolving, polluted futurity.²²

Taken as a whole, monstrous birth in cinema has been critically regarded as intensely regressive pro-life fables, a revenge-of-the-unborn tale delivering punitive remittance for women's increasingly democratized access to birth control. If not terrorized, the female body is deemed arcane and monstrous (though often, it is both). In Barbara Creed's ruminations on the "monstrous-feminine," she argues that the maternal gothic portrays the female body as an arcane site of monstrous regeneration. For Creed, who draws heavily upon Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection," the fecund/regenerative body is a spectacle-laden site of horror that encourages the audience to entertain a fascination and repulsion with the reproduction and female sexuality. In these films, says Creed, the pregnant body is an abject site of incoherence, incongruous with the category-obeying self and the societal structures that demand facile identifications.

As for the fetus, monstrosity and infancy have an intimate history, linked most succinctly in the study of abnormal and deformed bodies. Teratology, or the "science of monsters," has been a consistent preoccupation of medical, religious, and legal sectors since antiquity. Indeed, the study of birth defects and their causes, called "teratogenesis"²³ by the contemporary medical establishment, literally means "monster birth." The categorization of bodily abnormalities, from Siamese twins to hermaphroditism,²⁴ was part of popular seventeenth-century scientific inquiry, which sought to order the natural world according to emerging scientific technologies for knowing and documenting what once the purview of folklore and magic.²⁵ In her essay "Signs of Wonder and Traces of

Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences,” Rosi Braidotti notes that monstrous childbirth, as a preoccupation of both folklore and scientific discourse, has a long cultural history of expressing anxiety over the reproductive power of the maternal body, including the production of non-normative bodies. Indeed, Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* has noted the ways in which the pregnant body conjures up archetypal fears of contagion and “the unborn child with capricious ill will which makes it a danger towards others” (118-9). Further, the etiology of fetal deformity has long been co-existent with surreptitious moral restrictions and punishments directed towards the female body.²⁶ The deformed child, for its part, has traditionally functioned as a potent symbolic to represent, and to literally embody, the danger of taboo breaking. Recalling etymological origins of teratogenesis, the non-normative infantile body is awe-inspiring and dangerous in liminality and supposed impurity. In the cultural discourse, their bodies evidence the horrors of taboo sexual practices such as incest and inbreeding, the drama of parental neglect and ignorance (fetal alcohol syndrome, “crack babies”) or the reaffirmation of industrialized nation’s primacy over impoverished “primitive” or “Third World” nations.

In the maternal gothic, the parasitic relationship between mother and child is reversed, and the mother often becomes an unwilling puppet to the fully sentient and manipulative puerile puppeteer. With the advent of fetal imaging technology and the construction of the fetus as an endangered innocent body, this is an extension of a rhetoric formation that emerges during the period. “[T]he fetus,” says Franklin, “is defined as an individual agent who is separate from the mother and has its own distinct interests of which it is both aware and capable of acting on” (193). In *The Unborn* and

Inseminoid, the monstrous fetus takes over the mother's personality completely. Svengali-like, it bends her will towards its own ends and commands her body to perform hideously uncharacteristic activities. Foreshadowing the Feral Child quality of her soon-to-be infant, *The Unborn* finds Virginia (Brook Adams) becoming savage and unhuman, rummaging through her refrigerator in a trance to find food that will appease the creature inside her. In this, the film exaggerates the common "pickles and ice cream" lore of pregnancy and makes it monstrous, as Virginia eats raw, red meat to appease the fetus's presumed bloodlust. Virginia also claws at her husband during sex, marring his body as a result of her newly-acquired insatiable libido. In this film, sexual aggressiveness and pregnancy are incompatible, and libidinal impulses on the part of the pregnant body are assured signs of abnormality. Another pregnant mother murders her lesbian partner, stating "I can't love you both—baby needs all my love." In *Inseminoid*, the alien impregnation gives its host inhuman strength, and she is able to dispatch her male companions with ease. Her physiology is transformed as well: like her unborn monstrous child, she is now able to breathe the alien atmosphere. Like *The Bad Seed* before it, the maternal body in the maternal gothic becomes codeterminate with its revolting offspring—to birth a monster is to be a monster.

Physiologically, the monstrous infants of the maternal gothic are invariably animalistic in their physical presence. A nod to recapitulation theory,²⁷ the deformed and monstrous infants continually embody a former evolutionary state—a eugenic nightmare of lost civilization and negative futurity slouching (or crawling) towards Gomorrah. The nightmare sequence in *The Fly* presents a miscegenated larva wriggling out of the birth

canal of its unwilling mother (Geena Davis). In *The Brood*, Nola (Samantha Eggar) parthenogenically births a litter of faceless, grunting youths in her external womb sacs. *The Manitou* conjures up a particularly racist version of this trend by impregnating Karen (Susan Strasberg) with a 400-year-old Native American spirit, (re)born as savage pygmy warrior. *It's Alive* presents its infant monster, created by make-up and special effects designer Rick Baker (*The Howling*, *An American Werewolf in Paris*, *The Nutty Professor*), nearly an hour into the ninety-one-minute film. The eponymous monstrosity brandishes a muscled frame, two animalistic claws, an encephalitic head reminiscent of alien invaders from 1950s science fiction, and a set of vampiric fangs. The alien child of *Inseminoid* looks not unlike a hairless warthog, huffing and grunting its way into the world. These are offspring that directly oppose the doughy, cherubic frames of an Anne Geddes's infant--bodies whose singular defining quality is their unerring helplessness. In their savage physicality, the monstrous infants suggest an arrested, even regressive, phylogeny. No cherished children of nature, these animalistic infants are out of the cradle, endlessly rocking towards a horrifying futurity.

Indeed, the monstrous infant is part Feral Child and part Alien in the typology of this dissertation. Self-sufficient and savage survivors, their pre-civilized nature seems in service of a foreign and unrecognizable futurity. As their deformed and animalistic physiognomy suggests, the primal children of cinema have been genetically primed for battle, be it global or simply gestational. Though monsters, they emerge as seasoned warriors ready to conquer a hostile post-natal environment, after having already conquered an infinitely more treacherous pre-natal terrain. As a trope, the monstrous

fetus is birthed as a misshapen and vengeful presence—a Phantom of the Uterus who has survived the imprisonment of the womb to wreak havoc on the outside world. Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in *Demon Seed*'s *infanta ex machina*, a fusion of a woman and a sentient computer, who is born clad in literal bronze armor, like St. George emerging victoriously from a draconian uterus. As such, the monstrous fetus represents an evolutionary combatant—not my child, not a child at all—but rather a thing that represents the end of the (good, recognizable) present and the start of the (terrible, unrecognizable, inhuman) future.

This may seem to take me far afield from queerness and the perverse spectator. Earlier I have noted the manner in which child monstrosity—in maskedness, in possession, in developmental stasis, in revolt, in unbelonging—provides a vocabulary to discursively construct the semiotic impossibility of queer childhood. I originally planned to exclude this cycle of films, thinking that deformed and beastly fetuses had little to offer in terms of identification for the queer spectator. In these films, bodily difference is especially material in the determination of a child's present and future normalcy—in short, if it does not look like a child, it is not a child. Queerness, by contrast, has been understood as horrifying for its unphysicality—that the seemingly normal/normative could secretly be queer. In children, concern over their normalcy arises when they seem not to adhere to gender norms through their actions, interests, and desires. However, as queerness has been increasingly understood or promoted as a product of biology—either through recourse to genetics or hormonal production—so have attendant concerns about the eradication of queers through a form of negative eugenics. Rightfully, many queers

grow anxious when explorations for the “gay gene” are mobilized. Diagnosis never seems divorced from “cure.” Indeed, as public discourse can now conceive of a queerness that extends to a pre-natal body, the monstrous fetus becomes a prescient symbolic for the biologized queer body and the infantile body queered by science.

In the domestic melodrama *The Twilight of the Golds* (1997), a heterosexual couple awaits the birth of their first child, only to discover through genetic testing that the child carries the genetic propensity for queerness. Unsure whether they would want to raise a gay or lesbian child, Suzanne (Jennifer Beals) and her husband consider aborting the fetus. The issue is complicated by the fact that Suzanne’s brother, David (Brendan Fraser), is gay, and during the course of the film he learns that his parents would have aborted him had they known of his potential sexuality. This revelation fractures the tense family structure, and though the family reunites at the film’s conclusion, it is clear that David remains a developmental failure in his parents’ eyes.

No doubt *The Twilight of the Golds* views itself as a secular humanist fable of issue-driven import. Well within the classic “problem picture” formula, it asks for complete spectatorial allegiance with Suzanne and her decision to keep or terminate her abnormal pregnancy. The film’s crisis, however, is figured as maternal and extraparental as the unborn fetus doubles as the past self of the abject adult queer body. Instead of literally possessing sentience and desires as in the maternal gothic, *The Twilight of the Golds* employs the adult David as an emotional doppelganger. In melancholia and anger, David uses this misfit child as a point of disidentification to “look back” at his own birth. In this, he realizes that his sexuality has and continues to make him incompatible with the

familial and that the proposed abortion functions as a retroactive attack upon his own existence. In the film's climax, David confronts his father about the proposed abortion, screaming, "You're letting her kill me! You're killing me!"

Like the films of the maternal gothic, the unborn child of *Twilight of the Gods* represents something nonnormative and threatening to the coherency of the familial. More telling, however, is the uncanniness of the child—in doubling as David's past self, the fetus represents both the terrible future of the family line and its existing failure in the body of David. The rejection of the adult David parallels that of the gestating queer subject—he is, in a sense, aborted from the familial structure as a stand-in for the voiceless fetus. However, unlike the maternal gothic, this film bypasses the demonization of the maternal body—Suzanne is not a polluted vessel in this film, nor is David's mother deemed "to blame" for David's queerness. Instead, David stands in as the polluted body that threatens the family yet again by exposing their silent prejudices. In debating the "viability" of the queer fetal subject, they are quite transparently passing judgment on David's suitability for life—if only they could have had a straight son instead of a monster. If only they had the parental fortitude to halt the encroachment of queerness—this terrible, unrecognizable (anti-)futura, at its origins. In this, monstrosity is transferred from the maternal body and placed upon the queer subject, a manifestation of teratogenic abnormality that has been transferred, nonsensically, from an imaginary avuncular bond.

The Paternal Gothic

Whereas the films explored in the maternal gothic focus upon a woman's terror at the prospect of carrying an alien presence inside her body (with the attendant horror *at* the female body as a site of monstrosity), other films focus instead on the figure of the father. In the maternal gothic, the father is physically absent (*I Don't Want to Be Born*, *The Manitou*, *Xtro*, *Demon Seed*) or weak-willed and metaphorically absent (*Rosemary's Baby*, *The Brood*, *The Unborn*). This should come as no surprise, as *The Bad Seed* and *The Exorcist* taught that single mothers could only raise demons. In the male-focused film, which I will call the "paternal gothic," terror arises from questions of heterosexual paternity and a sense of anxiety over the child's Oedipal desire to murder and/or replace his father.

In many ways, Larry Cohen's *It's Alive* (1974) embodies many of the elements noted earlier in the maternal gothic: the monster is an infant, it is represented as physiologically regressed, and the mother is treated (at least initially) as a contaminated transmitter of monstrosity. There are differences, however. In *It's Alive*, no evidence before delivery suggests that anything is "wrong" with the fetus, and it certainly makes no attempt to exit the uterus early or control the mother's will. It is only this film that does not resort to the conceit of bodily invasion or ecological pollution to produce its monstrosity. Indeed, the issue of causality is never resolved, which leaves the child's monstrous origins (or teratogenesis) a lingering question. In this, it suggests something very normal—expected, evolved, even natural—about this monstrous child. Additionally, *It's Alive* is the only film within this cycle that begins with the monstrous birth that the other films reserve for their climactic finales. As such, we may say that the film concerns

itself less with the teratogenic production of the non-normative but rather with parental accountability for monstrosity that is the inevitable product of the polluted present state. In the film, Frank Davies (John P. Ryan) and his wife Lenore (Sharon Farrell), a bland suburban white couple, await the arrival of their second child. Upon birth, the monstrous infant kills the doctors and nurses in the delivery room before escaping into the city, where he commits a number of murders in the name of survival. Frank rejects his child as an inhuman monster and even actively seeks out the infant for extermination. At his wife's urging, however, Frank welcomes the child back into their home and even attempts to protect the infant from authorities before a battalion of police officers gun down the baby in a sewer. However, the film ends with a radio report that another monstrous child has been born, suggesting the boundless (re)generation of monstrosity.

Though all of the films in this dissertation deal in some manner with a horrifying family romance—the confusion of tongues between parents and their hideous progeny, *It's Alive* is the most explicitly Frankensteinian of the bunch. Besides the eponymous title, a line from the 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel, *It's Alive* presents a soliloquy midway through the film in which “Frank” questions the permeable boundaries between normality and abnormality, monster and non-monster: “When I was a kid, I always thought that the monster was Frankenstein. You know, Karloff walking about in those big shoes grunting. I thought he was Frankenstein. Then I went to high school and read the book and I realized that Frankenstein was the doctor who created him... Somehow the identities get all mixed up, don't they?” In this, the film questions (much like Shelley's novel and James Whale's classic film) the designation of

monstrosity, as Frank must come to accept his parental responsibility. Additionally, whereas most of the films in this chapter construct multiple narrative removes to authorize child abuse (the child is not mine, the child is alien/possessed/inherently evil, the child is not a child at all), this film does the opposite. Rather than Othering the child, the film initially presents the child as Other in the first fifteen minutes and slowly humanizes the infant until its untimely demise evidences the tyranny of normalcy rather than its long-awaited restoration.

Indeed, the film provides little rationale for child abuse. *It's Alive* challenges the abject construction of fetal monstrosity and instead considers physical monstrosity as central and co-existent with the discourses of normality. Ultimately, it argues that monstrosity exists at the heart of the American family and that this frightening futurity must be accepted and integrated as a troubling exemplar of modernity. Several film critics²⁸ have argued that this film epitomizes a shift towards “progressive horror” in the post-Watergate era. In Vivian Sobchack’s essay “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” she argues that the horror genre, along with science fiction and television melodrama, all begin to critique the normative family structure in the 1970s. In the sequels that follow,²⁹ the *It's Alive* series becomes more complex in its treatment of monstrosity, ultimately centralizing the infants as misunderstood freaks in a world bent upon their annihilation. However, the designation of the film *It's Alive* as simply “progressive” is highly problematized by its abject treatment of the maternal body. This instance of “progressive horror” is figured as a struggle within and through

the paternal, an acceptance of monstrosity at the heart of the family which still casts a suspicious eye at the polluted, porous body of the female.

As the narrative of *It's Alive* plays upon the Frankenstein mythos, the question of acceptance and/or rejection of monstrosity evacuates the maternal body completely. In this, Frank's concern echoes the sentiment of the doctor in the delivery room who told Lenore that she "had done her share" in gestating the embryo. Indeed, the "women's work" of this film seems to entail impregnation and gestation. After that, the delivery and management of the child become the responsibility of the paternal/patriarchal state. Indeed, the film tellingly absents the viewer from the actual delivery scene, lingering instead with Frank and the other expectant fathers in the waiting room, where they discuss the polluted and teratogenic world in which they live. "What a fine world to bring a kid into," one father says, sarcastically. The baby's "delivery" (and its subsequent murder of the medical personnel) takes place off-screen. Our introduction to the scene of carnage comes through the eyes of Frank, clearly established as our protagonist, as he descends on the scene. As he surveys the carnage, he seems to avoid his wife strapped to the gurney, who is wildly calling out "What does my baby look like? What's wrong with my baby?" Indeed, he seems horrified at his wife. She seems but an extension of her monstrous infant. This is underlined later when he hesitates to embrace her and she says, "You're not afraid of me, are you?" He laughs nervously and deflects the question by saying, "I've always been afraid of you, especially those eyes." But the point is made: after the discussion of pollution and contamination in the waiting room, it is evident that Lenore is seen as a carrier of pollution, if not infected herself.

It's Alive draws fairly tacit links between the parasitic presence of the fetus within the mother's womb and the father's fear that the child will become a parasitic presence after its birth. Beneath the placid surface of heteronormative domesticity lays Frank's parental anxiety about the impending birth and possibly his resentment towards the couple's previous child, Chris. In the labor room, Lenore says to Frank, "I'm glad we decided to have the baby. It's not going to tie you down, is it sweetheart? You're not going to feel trapped like you did last time, are you?" In *It's Alive*, the child is also parasitic in that it threatens to take over its father's life, and Frank must learn to accept a mixture of love and hatred that characterizes his relationship with not just his abject child but (it is suggested) his "normal" child as well. As Patricia Brett Ehrens and Sobchack note, the turn towards "progressive" horror saw a proliferation of just this type of patriarchal critique.³⁰ As an analysis of the heteronormative family, the film details the father's acknowledgement of his own murderous intent towards his own offspring—in effect locating the family as a hotbed of repressed pedophobic rage.

Other films in the paternal gothic are not so sanguine about their non-normative progeny. The films that end this chapter offer the most extreme version of parental disassociation: the children are decidedly revealed to be "not mine"—one an implanted alien horde and the other the adopted son of a jackal. In each, the discovery of the alien/demonic child is made post-utero, and the crisis centers on the father's encroaching doubt over the validity of his lineage.

The Other Paternal Gothic

In this section, I begin with *Village of the Damned* (1960) as the figuration's progenitor, and then segue into a reading of *The Omen* (1975-1981) series. The 1960s British film *Village of the Damned*, like *It's Alive*, contains bodies that trouble the boundaries of the familial in profound ways. Rather than being feral, evolutionarily-regressed bodies, however, the children of *Village of the Damned* are eerily serene and intellectually superior. With enlarged frontal lobes and detached rationality, they are the civilized Eloi to *It's Alive's* brutish Morlock infants. *Village of the Damned* also shares many qualities with other previously analyzed revolting child figurations: the perfect child, the performing child, the powerful child, and the silent watching child. My discussion of *Village of the Damned* here is brief, however—I want to save detailed consideration of this seminal text for the next chapter, which concerns itself with groups of monstrous children. Here I consider the manner in which the bodily invasion and village-wide impregnation of the townswomen becomes figured as a purely masculine/paternal crisis.

In *Village of the Damned*,³¹ the small town of Midwich, England, grinds to a halt one afternoon as clocks and machinery simultaneously stop and the townsfolk become inexplicably comatose. The stasis period passes, and later the residents discover that all of the women of childbearing age have become pregnant. Five months along, several strange emotionless children are born with bizarre telepathic and hypnotic abilities—able to read the minds of others and also to direct their will. In addition, all of the children share a hive-like group mind, learning and communicating in tandem through their psychic connection. After the children lash out against several villagers, British military

officials—led by Maj. Alan Bernard (Michael Gwynn)—threaten to imprison or exterminate the children. Prof. Gordon Zellaby (George Sanders), however, offers to tutor the children himself—including his son, David (Martin Stephens)—and learn their secrets. Eventually, he concludes that the children are the result of a large-scale alien impregnation and that the invaders plan to set up similar enclaves in other villages to propagate their species. To stave off such an invasion, Gordon kills himself and the children with a bomb that he detonates in the schoolhouse.

Village of the Damned notably underplays the assumedly central maternal conflict of the maternal gothic in favor of focusing almost exclusively on male fear (including doubts of paternity). Indeed, focus upon the women of Midwich is largely limited to their inability to explain the phantom parturition to their doubtful husbands and families. Only one woman, Gordon's wife Anthea (Barbara Shelley), is given a central role in the film, and her anxiety stems not from the fear that the child she birthed is not her own but rather that his "adult-like" ways make her role obsolete—an anxiety that troubled Christine Penmark in *The Bad Seed* as well. Though the set pieces remain the same (metaphoric rape, strange birth, discovery of the invasion), this film is decidedly unconcerned with the experiences of the women. The men collectively view their wives and daughters with bitter suspicion and their newborn children with infanticidal detachment. In a telling sequence early in the film, two homosocial circles of men gather in the midst of the crisis—one in the war room, where they discuss how to manage the strange, powerful children, and the other in a local pub, where they sit silently and drink. In an unusually long non-scored (silent) scene, the camera follows one of the villagers, who finds both his

wife and teenage daughter pregnant, from his house to a local pub. Also there are several other men from the village, all looking drunk, dejected, confused, and insecure. Director Wolf Rilla uses shot-reverse shots between the various villagers and the bartender— anxious glances exchanged, but no words are spoken. Finally, the father speaks from the bar, framed with the other men behind him, stating of the children, “I hope that none of them lives.” Rather than punish the men or characterize them as mob-minded simpletons, the film allows the option of child abuse and infanticide to linger—the spared rod that leads to apocalyptic culmination.

Indeed, the men in the bar are only a parochial version of the other patriarchal force in the film—the military. In a parallel construction, army officials note that similar instances of “ominous plural parthenogenesis” have occurred in other regions across the globe. In Russia, the Communist government bombed an entire village and eradicated its population to eliminate the threat. In the far north, indigenous Eskimos beat the children to death shortly after birth, finding the incompatibility of their towheaded whiteness to be a portent of evil. Indeed, as Richard Dyer notes in *White*, blondeness is a cultural signifier in and of itself. It is the penultimate signifier of whiteness. Blondeness, he notes, makes the whiteness more saturated with all of the qualities prized in the construction of the white body: cleanliness, purity, goodness, light, civilization, holiness, innocence, and transcendence.³² As in *The Bad Seed* previously and in *The Omen* that follows, the image of childhood innocence—predicated in whiteness—is deployed by the revolting youths to circumvent culpability. *Village of the Damned*, however, reveals the cultural specificity of this construction—in other contexts, whiteness, childhood, and innocence are not

mutually codeterminate. Under different conditions, whiteness is a liability, and the residents of Midwich are dupes for assuming a tacit connection between properly raced bodies and bodies properly devoid of “bad” childhood traits. They have failed to recognize the children as arbiters of a terrible, unrecognizably alternative futurity. Ultimately the military allows for Gordon to advance with his pacifist plan, to the nation’s detriment. To become the nation’s true savior (read: to be a good citizen, to be a good father, to be a real man), he must abandon the stultifying effeminacy of diplomacy and accede to the curative power of child abuse. Like Christine Penmark, he must sacrifice himself to save his loved ones; but unlike Christine, he is not (really, after all) related to his bad seed and therefore carries no eugenic blame for its condition. Gordon additionally succeeds where Christine, the consummate failure, can only demonstrate her weakness. Where Christine was culpable—a monster, Gordon is capable—a martyr.

The 1976 film *The Omen* sits at an interesting juncture in the cinema of revolting childhood. Like *The Bad Seed*, *The Innocents*, and *Village of the Damned*, it deals with the covert quality of white childhood innocence and the power of closetness for the child monster. In his essay “The Child as Demon in Films Since 1961,” Wheeler Dixon describes Damien, the central figure and “Anti-Christ” demon child of *The Omen* (1976), as “the blond young son of American ambassador Gregory Peck, [who] serves as the ‘deus ex’ for a series of horrifying murders.”³³ This serves as a satisfactory introduction to the film (much pithier than mine here) but one that I think is embedded with a very telling error. Dixon claims that the demon child Damien is a blond boy when it is fairly obvious from the film or any of the promotional material that he is a dark-haired child in

The Omen and each successive sequel. Indeed, Dixon later claims that the film casts a child who acts with “Nazi-like precision,” suggesting that the film traffics in the iconography of eugenics and Hitler Youth. This is a claim very well-suited to a film like *Village of the Damned*, whose cabal of blond-haired youths practically goose-step on the screen (more on this next chapter). But Dixon’s gaffe is correct in that this is a film about whiteness and privilege; additionally it is a film about the future. In this, it shares another quality with *Village of the Damned* and the child-as-collective films that will follow: at stake is the encroachment of an unrecognizable and hostile futurity for the existing world order. More perversely, this film finds the Oedipal narrative veering into an alternative, radical futurity. Indeed, where other revolting child texts merely hint at the bad queer child bringing about the end of civilization, *The Omen* delivers.

The Omen, directed by Richard Donner, is the story of how the Biblical Anti-Christ arrives in the bosom of a wealthy white American family and how the child’s protectors guide him through childhood to further his destiny of world domination. The film begins in Rome on June 6, at 6am, as British Ambassador Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) learns of the death of his son. To spare his wife Katherine (Lee Remick) the grief of this loss, he agrees to adopt a son whose mother had died and raise the orphan as their own. The child, Damien (Harry Stephens), collects a series of protectors (a stern governess, a Rottweiler) who dispatch those who stand in his way, and Satan himself seems to step in whenever truth-seeking do-gooders come too close to the truth. In the film’s climax, Richard attempts to kill his evil child but the police shoot him before he commits the act. In the funeral denouement, we learn that the President has adopted

Damien, who is now well on his way to world domination.

In *Damien: The Omen II* (1978), the Anti-Christ (now played by Jonathan Scott-Taylor) is in the care of his CEO uncle, Richard Thorn (William Holden) and his aunt Ann (Lee Grant). The family business is Thorn Industries, which seeks to end world hunger by controlling the food supply in various third-world countries. Damien, now an adolescent, attends military school with his cousin, Mark (Lucas Donat). There, he excels in all of his studies and is watched over by an avuncular new emissary who reveals his demonic legacy. After initially rebuffing his calling, Damien assumes the mantle and begins to commit murders on his own behalf (including those of his cousin and mother) to become the head of Thorn Industries.

Finally, *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981) casts Damien Thorn (now played by Sam Neill) as a seemingly benign corporate benefactor helping to heal the world from an economic recession. After assuming the mantle of the U.S. Ambassador to England (the post once held by his adoptive father), Damien starts on an infanticidal campaign to execute the second coming of Christ. After consummating a relationship with a female reporter named Kate Reynolds (the “Barbara Walters of British television”), he pulls her son into his demonic cabal, resulting in the boy’s death. Enraged, Kate stabs Damien in the final conflict, paving the way for the Second Coming and (one assumes) a Biblical rapture.

I summarize each of the films here not to suggest that there is a single ideological strain (far from it) but rather to illustrate the Oedipal qualities of the series as a whole. At each stage, Damien only succeeds/proceeds by replacing a paternal figure, either through

the intervention of his watchers, Satan himself, or (finally) Damien's own hand. It is the terror of the heterosexual developmental narrative that animates this series of films—the repetition-compulsion impulse of reproductive futurism is literalized in these films. As Edelman notes, “[t]he Child... marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.”³⁴ In these films is the uncanny terror of creating a version of oneself that will eventually render the self obsolete—as Robin Wood says, “seeking to mould [children] into replicas of ourselves, perpetuators of a discredited tradition.”³⁵ Parental-replacement anxiety figures strongly in child horror, though *The Omen* figures the Oedipal as a narrative imperative of the apocalypse—the son who must destroy his father to assume the mantle of world domination. Indeed, both involve a mother who, though she gave birth to the son in question, is immediately evacuated from the narrative, either through death or disinterest. The overarching absence of the mother as a love object is one of the many ways in which *The Omen* series de-heterosexualizes the narrative. Though the paternal gothic in *The Omen* is laid out in explicitly developmental terms—to assume the mantle of the anti-Christ is indeed to replace the father—Damien seems unwilling to transfer libidinal cathexis beyond the queerly-coded liminality of adolescence. Indeed, the new world order, prophesied and promulgated, looks trenchantly more queer than the last.

As in *Rosemary's Baby*, Damien functions (at least in the first two films) primarily as a cipher, mobilizing adult needs and adult agendas of world domination. In *The Omen*, we witness the intense sacralization of the child—the white child, naturally—

to such a degree that he becomes nearly inanimate in his presence. Unlike the constructions of other enacting evil or murderous children (*The Bad Seed*, *Halloween*), the child does not commit the murders in *The Omen*, but rather acts are committed on behalf of the child by emissaries (human or beastly) or unseen forces. The child enacts no labor on behalf of his supposed legacy. Damien, in fact, is only a set decoration in the first film—like some golden idol, he is not the activator of his own desire but rather the focal point through which others' desires are activated.

In a particularly telling (and chilling) scene—Damien's birthday—the boy's nanny cares for him as his parents selfishly converse with the media to provide the perfect coverage for his (but actually their) special event. Noting an opportunity for a perfect family photo, the mother takes Damien from his nanny to pose for the picture. The nanny unceremoniously walks her way to the third story window of the mansion and ties a noose around her neck. Perched on the windowsill, she calls out to her charge: "Look at me, Damien! I love you! It's all for you Damien! It's all for you!" She then jumps and hangs herself, and her lifeless body crashes through the second story window, causing the servants inside to scream. In this way, the film brilliantly lays bare the normally invisible labor that underpins white bourgeois privilege. Damien's absent animus functions as a hyperbolization of white privilege itself, which remains undetected, unacknowledged, and yet upheld by the ritualistic functions of certain technologies of assistance. Indeed, Damien's followers (later dubbed "Disciples of the Watch") double as servants throughout the series. They are the economic underclass that commits the dirty work to keep him ignorant from the maintenance of his class status.

Indeed, the followers (or rather, his controllers) form another familial network around Damien: like the “good” family, the “bad” family sees Damien as not so much a child but a useful object or a weapon. In one particularly telling scene, his new governess winds Damien up like a toy on his tricycle before releasing him down a hallway where he collides with his mother, sending her over the balcony and down to her death. However, the good adults are distinguished from the bad adults in terms of both class and sexuality. Damien’s new sinister governess, for instance, is a stern-looking woman who clearly takes on the queer trappings of Mrs. Danvers from Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940)—the lesbian governess par excellence. Indeed, upon arriving, she claims her lack of romantic preoccupations makes her most suitable for the position, stating, “She’s not the marrying type,” a virtual quote of Mrs. Danvers’s Sapphic line “I’m not the type of woman that men marry.” This queer cabal stands in direct opposition to the normative white patriarchal family, so precariously set upon its pedestal by the labor, silence, and invisibility of a queerly-coded underclass. The bad underclass whites have no families of their own—they are anti-family, anti-futurity. They serve the Thorns but ultimately seek to overthrow them. The specter of class insurrection and queer liberation haunts the text, hyperbolized by the inevitability of apocalypse and mobilized through the unlikely figure of the child.

In this way, the film lays bare the relations of white bourgeois heterosexual parenthood: like his “good” parents who use Damien to complete their proper, authentic, portrait-worthy lifestyle, the “bad” parents utilize Damien to further their own nefarious, oblique agenda. The child itself, as a child, is incidental—the child as a symbol, as

sacralized figure, however, is paramount. He is the Watcher—devoid of desire or malice, more an arcane artifact to be possessed and protected than a living being to be nurtured and guided. Damien, for all of the terrible acts that occur in his presence or on his behalf, retains something almost approaching innocence through his seeming ignorance of his destiny.

Though *The Omen* ends with Damien in the hands of the president, the sequel finds him under the care of his uncle, the CEO of a WTO-reminiscent global corporation. The second film in the series links white privilege explicitly to colonialist actions in third world nations and places evil within the framework of global corporations rather than simply decrepit American aristocracy. The film as a whole is structured to mediate between two spheres of action: the Thorn Industries of Damien's uncle and the Damien's military school. Once in power, the corporation seeks to "help" third world nations by controlling the world food supply, a goal achieved through land acquisitions, exploiting labor, and murdering land-owners unwilling to sell. Like the most ingrained of colonialist endeavors, Thorn Industries forces third world nations to become dependant on United States corporate aid under the auspices of philanthropy. "Our profitable future," says one of the businessmen, "is also in famine." In military school, Damien excels in every way and eventually learns of his demonic legacy through the intervention of a military man, another underclass laborer sent to protect the young squire. Through similar plot lines and parallel editing, the film suggests a strong link between the two: indeed, Damien is receiving a proper education in colonialist projects through the Fascist world of military youth training. More than any film since *Village of the Damned* (1960), this film

explicitly invokes the iconography of the Hitler Youth movement to cast an eerie haze over the entire enterprise.

Queerness, too, characterizes Damien's entry into maturity. Damien himself is specifically coded as queer in the text: in terms of acting, Jonathan Scott-Taylor's high-pitched British-inflected voice reads as distinctly feminine, especially when contrasted with the more gruff voices of those around him. Narratively, however, boys continually harass Damien at school, claiming he "likes it on his back." Damien also casts provocatively erotic glances at his would-be abusers before unleashing a *Carrie*-esque psychic rage on them in revenge.³⁶ The sequel *Damien: The Omen II* structures itself as a bildungsroman—a narrative of personal discovery often characterized as an adolescent coming-of-age story. This is *Oliver Twisted*, we could say. This film diverges from the first in that Damien, rather than being a mere object, becomes the protagonist of the film, and his discovery of his own parentage and legacy serves as the emotional core of the text. His "revelation" of his apocalyptic role is fraught with the kind of existential crisis and tears reserved for representations of Christ in Gethsemane before his prophesied crucifixion. After this occurrence, Damien officially assumes his destiny as Anti-Christ. He has, as his military protector told him, "left childhood things behind and become a man." That *becoming* is narrativized particularly within a heterosexual developmental narrative. From here, he oversees the death of his father by his mother—and then kills his mother in a blatant rejection of Oedipal (heterosexual) becoming. Though Damien assumes the mantle of his father and takes control of his own destiny by the end of the second film, the audience is given many clues that Damien's bildungsroman of *Oliver*

Twisted is a little more bent. Most trenchant is Damien's very "brotherly" relationship with his cousin and confidante, Mark. Their romantic attachment, evidenced throughout the film, is made denotatively clear when Damien offers to allow Mark, who learns of his secret and rejects him, to become Damien's partner in ruling the world after the apocalypse. As Damien says to him, "Come with me, Mark. I can take you with me—look at me, Mark. I'll ask you once more. Please come with me." Mark refuses, and Damien is forced to kill him in order to protect his secret—forcing his love interest to suffer a brain aneurism. Though the incompatible, abject body of the Anti-Christ child will grow into his father's role—growing sideways, but not up—he will not become a replica of his father (though maybe Satan, his true father).

In *Omen III*, the Oedipal narrative continues, even becoming literalized: Damien has in no small way become his father by taking over the position the father held during Damien's youth. In this film, too, Damien is linked to a certain nascent youth rebellion: in his role as Youth Ambassador to the United Nations, he talks of helping young people to gain a more prominent role in world affairs and to keep them from becoming miniature version of their parents. "We ply them with our values, indoctrinate them with our mediocrity," he says, so that they come out "clipped, impotent, and *safe*." Like the best of "sinthomosexuals," as Edelman calls those queer antagonists of reproductive futurism, Damien crafts a manifesto of anti-reproductive futurity—endangering the next generation while crafting a new world order. Indeed, making children *unsafe seems* to be part of his major plan, as he soon enlists a number of youths to commit infanticide to ferret out the Second Coming. Damien becomes a new generation King Herod—staving off his own

replacement, defined in purely Oedipal terms. The murder sequences, including a mother burning her baby with an iron and boy scouts stabbing an infant in a carriage, are remarkably unrestrained in their infanticide. Indeed, the film overall is the most pedophobic of the series: not only does it reserve some of the more elaborately gruesome scenes for the murder of infants (by children), but it seems to suggest that children are by nature full of murderous lust.

That bloodlust is funneled, quite conspicuously, through the threat of queerness and sexual deviance. In one scene, where Damien delivers a soliloquy to Satan in his basement, he first dances around and then walks up to a life-size figure of Christ that has been nailed backwards (facedown) on the cross. In what can only be described as “mounting and raping Christ,” Damien presses his body against the half-naked figure and then rubs his hands along the crucified man’s arms, leading down to a tender caress of the nail’s in the statue’s hands. He then reaches for the crown of thorns and says, “I wish I could force them in deeper!” He is speaking literally of the thorns on the crown, but also of course of forcing himself—Damien Thorn and his “thorn”—into the body of Christ. Later, the film becomes no less anally obsessed as he begins to have passionate sex with Kate Reynolds, a reporter who suspects him of evil motives. In the midst of the act, she asks him to “love” her, at which point he says that she must feel the pain of his existence, at which point he flips her over on her stomach and engages in painful sex—presumably anal intercourse. In another strain altogether, Kate’s son and Damien exchange erotic glance after erotic glance, as the son’s knowing looks at Damien to acknowledge his allegiance look less filial with each encounter. Finally, when Damien accepts the son into

the fold, they enact a ceremony thick with pederastic desire in which the boy repeats, “We two shall be one. I love you, Damien.” When the mother disrupts this exchange, it sets in motion a series of events that eventually leads up to her stabbing Damien (as a concerned mother or spurned lover?) and ushering in his eventual destruction.³⁷

In his essay “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” Robin Wood cites *The Omen* (just the first film) as a penultimate example of what he calls “reactionary horror,” despite its historical placement within this aforementioned shift towards “progressive horror” which questions instructional vanguards such as family, church, and the state. Indeed, he uses *The Omen* as a point of comparison against *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to explain how one supports dominant ideology and the other functions to critique and overturn that dominant ideology, respectively. As Wood says, *The Omen*, when compared to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, recapitulates “old-fashioned, traditional, reactionary” Hollywood horror at every turn: it is high-budget, star-studded, and glossily produced; narratively, it has a monster imported from Europe, centers on a “good family,” and reaffirms what he calls “traditional value systems” by ending a world that “was still the good, right, true one.”³⁸ Though I agree with Wood on many accounts, I question his central premise that this “good family” remains uninterrogated, or if they are in fact culpable in their own destruction. I would argue instead that the film is structured in such a way to leave audiences desiring the total annihilation of the social order predicated in reproductive futurism. As Dixon notes, the child becomes the spectator’s symbolic center as well: “[Adults] are all afraid, running from something, and Damien alone moves ahead in a straight line, unafraid and assured. His blond Nazi-like

‘perfection’ is matched by the single-mindedness of his purpose, and since the adults in the film can’t stop him, the audience begins to root for Damien.”³⁹

One of the more revealing legacies of *The Omen* series is the manner in which fans have rewritten the ending of the series to meet their own spectatorial needs. Though *Omen III: The Final Conflict* offers a clumsy ending in which magical daggers ultimately vanquish Damien, a fourth “Omen” film undermines this act of closure. In the made-for-TV picture called *Omen IV: The Awakening* (1991), a young white girl named Delia (Asia Vieira) seems to have her turn at playing the Anti-Christ. This is only partially true, as it is discovered that Delia is the daughter of Damien Thorne (thus granddaughter of the devil) and additionally that the true Anti-Christ is Delia’s twin brother, whose embryo has been diabolically implanted in Delia’s mother. But even before this continuity-busting fourth film, fans of the series crafted their own rationale to read the conclusion of *Omen III* as spiritual illusion and not the actual Rapture. As is common in queer reception practice, fans may chose to abandon, reorder, or completely reauthor narratives to meet their spectatorial needs—in this case, the need to see the world brought to an end.

Indeed, the issue of spectatorial pleasure in *The Omen* seems incredibly “thorny.” The series’ premise, with its heavily fatalistic worldview and inviolate prophecy, seems to arrest any expectation of a return to order. The series takes no small amount of sadistic devotion to the Rube Goldberg-ian machinations of its murders (indeed the puzzle-like quality of the deaths are not unlike a child’s game). The portentous raven is the audience’s cue to stay in their seats to witness the foretold carnage. But moreso, the film

takes immense glee in the end of civilization as we know it. This is a telling prospect given that, as Andrew Tudor notes, this is one of the highest-grossing horror films in cinema. Unless, of course, the dominant pleasure of the film—the hope—is a perverse desire for complete and total annihilation. It is a pleasure not of *what*, but *how*? How will the apocalypse arrive? What will it look like? How will “righteousness” inevitably and continually fail? What sacraments will be defiled along the way?

I end this chapter with *The Omen* because this film, more than any other, witnesses an unabashedly queer worldview that aligns queerness with class insurrection and generational revolt. This film frees queer childhood from mere connotation, which is, as D.A. Miller notes, the “dominating signifying practice of homophobia.”⁴⁰ *The Omen* is the film series where white privilege, heterosexual development, and class domination finally, literally, cannot ferret out the stranger in its midst and abject him/her from the zone of the livable. More than any other, this film hyperbolizes what the others merely suggest, either in fear or covert pleasure—that the revolting child is the queer child, dangerous in its ability to hide, abject and incompatible to the family, and finally, the revolt that may bring about social order’s immanent destruction.

It Takes a Child to Raze a Village: Demonizing Youth Rebellion

The politics of play. The strategy which converts the Underground to a brotherhood of clowns, the lifestyle which unites a generation in love and laughter... The politics of play: the international, equi-sexual, inter-racial survival strategy for the future, the laughing gas to counteract tomorrow's Mace. Onward to the eighties, Motherfuckers.

-- Richard Neville, *Play Power: Exploring the International Underground*¹

In January 1950, the cover of *Parents' Magazine* trumpeted the new role of children in the social and political landscape. Declaring, "This is the CHILDREN'S DECADE," the magazine featured a pair of Godlike adult hands tenderly guiding the Earth into the tiny outstretched hands of a child. Below the image, accompanying text reads: "The U.S. is richer in children than ever before. Let's give them good homes, good schools, good health!" In the accompanying editorial, American Parents' Committee chairman George J. Hecht states, "[b]ecause in the next 10 years the United States will have a record child population, we are now entering upon what can well be termed the Children's Decade."²

As pictured, the child is poised to receive the planet as one would a family heirloom; thus, historical legacy is preserved through a divestment of power and an investment in the next generation. As Lee Edelman notes, the child-as-future stands as “the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.”³ The films in this chapter, likewise, are interested in this generational exchange of power.

But revolting children are hedonistic, whiny, and impetuous. If the future is “held in trust” for them, these are trust-fund babies anxious to cash in before they reach proper maturity. This generational exchange is not so much a “handing over” as it is a “taking from.” Like the alien invasion movies that would be so immensely popular during the “Children’s Decade,” these generational usurpers demand all of the Earth’s resources with no promise of providing for its existing denizens. Exaggerating the normative qualities of childhood to grotesque proportions, revolting children animate a spectacle of impatience. Recall the monstrous fetuses from the previous chapter, who demanded to be born before it was their time—and multiply them into the dangerous child collectives that will populate this chapter. Revolting children, in an infectious sphere of influence, have a hard time waiting. In a single voice they seem to yell “Onward to the Children’s Decade, Motherfuckers.”

Like their more isolated playmates, the child collective recalls a variety of dangerous figurations. Most succinctly, the Watcher returns in this chapter as inverted looking relations and surveillance consistently threaten adult dominance over children. In

these films, the children seem to *know* adults instead and anticipate their movements in order to herd them into increasingly confined situations. The child collective also refigures “play” in these films into something malicious and warlike—as Destroyers, they turn frivolous play into something to dominate and control adult culture. Finally, these revolting children accentuate the generational gap, as their unspoken communication and isolated cabal mark them foreign and unknowable—the Alien from the Wise Child. This chapter deals with groups of children—en masse, in unison, working in concert but discordant with parental society. It follows the last in examining the films’s anxiety about *consuming futurity*—a phrase I choose carefully for its dual-edged salience. Like “revolting children,” a consideration of “consuming futurity” recalls both the threatening object (a future which consumes the present) and the act that attempts to negate that threat (controlling children as a means of determining the future). In consuming the future and directing its development through dominating the body of the child, the social order copes with an untenable yet-to-come. This unrecognizable futurity, I argue, is coded as queer in its realignment of familial bonds divorced from its hegemonic ties to kinship. Revolting child collectives generate categorical horror because they represent a dangerous alternative to the grounding principles of the heteronormative social order: development, kinship, and procreation—what Edelman refers to as “reproductive futurism.”⁴ To fulfill the social contract, children must become copies of the adults that guided their development and in turn guide the next generation. Wash, rinse, repeat. Revolting children, especially when joined together, arrest this anxious repetition—the

stopgap from the generation gap—no longer what Robin Wood calls “perpetuators of a discredited tradition.”⁵

This chapter, like the last, covers a series of related texts rather than a single case study as in *The Bad Seed* or *The Exorcist* chapters. Most centrally, I will be concerned with *Village of the Damned* (1960), *Who Can Kill a Child? [¿Quién puede matar a un niño?]* (1975), *The Children* (1980), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Beware: Children at Play* (1989), and *The Children* (2008)⁶ as major representative texts and will make references to other films when necessary.⁷ As one of these central texts is British and another Spanish, this chapter will take a less-specifically American focus but still contends that the notion of “consuming futurity” and the dissolution of heterofamilial primacy offers something approaching a universality of terror/pleasure. Despite their differences in eras and national cinemas, the revolting child collective films share a remarkable amount of narrative cogency—each trafficking in anxieties about surveillance and control of children’s bodies, their privatized and impenetrable system of communication, and their contagious influence upon “good” children. In short, these films of demonic youth rebellion chronicle an angry movement of varied but single-minded individuals who live outside the heterofamilial and seem intent on destroying it; they continuously draw new members into their fold—sometimes stealing them away from “good” homes; and their forces are everywhere, endlessly supplied. Indeed, they show no signs of decreasing their ranks. Such a description reads almost verbatim as a conservative characterization of the gay rights movement—a reflexivity of rhetoric that sutures the bond between bad child and queer spectator. I return to my claim in the last

chapter that the queerness of revolting children is not so much that they embody the antithesis of Edelman's reproductive futurity—where he calls upon queerness to take its place as society's death drive—but rather that they represent a radical alterity to heteronormative development. If they seem to “arrest” the growth of a civilization, it is only because that “growth” has been myopically conceived. This promise of a unified, unstoppable, undefined sideways movement stands as both the terror and the perverse pleasure of the revolting child collective film.

As with the other films in this dissertation, the child collective films offer varied modalities of pleasure for perverse and queer spectators. The gay horror fansite CampBlood (<http://www.campblood.org>), for instance, offers 1980's *The Children* as one of its must-see films in its “Homo Horror Guide.”⁸ The reviewer Buzz offers a fairly sophisticated assessment of his queer spectatorship with regards to the film, finding pleasure in reassessing the film as a work of camp—though the film, with its terrible acting, poor production values, and malicious hugging toddlers, needs little aid. Still, the camp reception of the film recalls modes of queer reception similar to *The Bad Seed*, where the qualities of normative childhood (in this case the need for affection) are exaggerated to a grotesque degree to reveal their artificiality. Given the film's overwrought quality, it is no coincidence that *The Children* would be adapted as a camp musical in 1998 by NYU students Stan Richardson and Hal Goldberg.⁹ As in the camp adaptations of *The Bad Seed*, Richardson and Goldberg's production utilized adults to play the roles of the revolting children. In the DVD commentary, Richardson expresses his affection for the original text (a hallmark of camp reception), saying, “obviously

there's a lot of humor in it, but we really wanted to give these people [the characters] a chance to speak and sing, which of course in some cases becomes really funny because these are really horrific people who aren't in touch with the [air quotes] 'real world'."¹⁰

Further, in the CampBlood review, the author locates pleasure in both the pedophobic elements of the film, saying, "Seeing as how I would sooner choke on my own vomit than spend more than 90 seconds in the company of a child, I may not be the most impartial reviewer for this film, but I just can't get enough once the sheriff and Mr. Freemont start blasting at the kids with a shotgun and hacking them up with what looks like a samurai sword... Irresponsible? Maybe. Tasteless? Probably. Delightful? Definitely." The review also praises the film for assailing heterosexual privilege ("This is the essence of the story: the selfish older generation... sees their very offspring transformed into an army of exterminating angels who punish them for their transgressions.")¹¹ As with this dissertation, the CampBlood review finds not one but multiple sites of pleasurable negotiation with the text informed by the specificity of queer subjectivity.

Curiouser and Curiouser

The orphanage is becoming more populated. In the last chapter, the monsters of the maternal gothic emerged as hardened, developmentally-regressed warriors, backed into an evolutionary corner in their feral futurity. They were solitary and isolated, defensive but not defenseless, rejected by their parents and yet desiring a place within a system of kinship relations. Previously addressed films, for all their perversity, rarely

questioned the necessity of biological kinship. Their very demand for inclusion reinforced the primacy of blood family relations—it is only natural, the films seemed to say, that the abjected/rejected/abused child would seek a return to the familial. They trouble the family with their troubling incompatibility, but there is no *outside* the family. If the last chapter explored those bodies that were abjected from the familial, the films of this chapter say, “we have built a new family.”

The chapters of this dissertation have also shuttled these troublesome children along an increasingly infanticidal path—Rhoda the uncanny child who cannot be rejected or abused, Regan the perverse child who needs the Devil beaten out of her, Damien the child who should have been strangled in his crib... perhaps it is understandable that these final children should band together for survival. The children in this dissertation continue to grow sideways, as Kathryn Bond Stockton says—increasing in number, expanding their dominion, moving from isolated incidence to global pandemic. It should be no surprise, too, that as the children become numerous in these films, so does the pedophobic glee with which they are dispatched. Nameless and undifferentiated, the children in these films are subjected to more raw violence per capita than any other series of films: *Village of the Damned* incinerates a schoolhouse of children for humanity’s survival, *The Children* (1980) demands that adults hack off the limbs of the youths, and *Who Can Kill a Child* and *Beware: Children at Play* both climax in a bloody machine-gun assault on a faceless horde of oncoming children. The alibi against engaging in pleasurable fantasies of child abuse comes not from the child’s supposed need to be rescued (as in *The Exorcist*) but rather from the sheer reduction of child bodies to *things*

(like zombies) that threaten the fabric of civilization. More prone to exploitation treatments than the other films in this dissertation, pretense and disavowal seem to fall away in revolting child collective films. The final twelve minutes of Troma Film's *Beware: Children at Play*, for instance, is nothing less than an orgy of infanticide.

If this dissertation follows a pedophobic narrative logic—from *The Bad Seed*'s melodramatic crisis to *Who Can Kill a Child*'s eponymous promise of graphic child murder—so too does it continue to chart a certain narrative of queer becomingness. As the child becomes more and more queer, so too does it become more targeted for patriarchal violence—as true in “real life” as it is within the cinematic imagination. I argue that the films of monstrous childhood offer a *mise-en-scène* of queer desire, each in its own way charting a terrain in which queer experience can be reanimated, reinterpreted, or rewritten. The question of this chapter—the emotive possibility and *mise-en-scène* of desire—is the possibility of alternative kinship, queer community, and the collective revolt against a heteronormative social order. Recall that these chapters have followed a kind of queer narrative of becoming, one that stands into opposition to heteronormative accounts of development: closetedness and deception, voicedness and rage, exclusion and solitude, and finally community and coalition.

Dangerous Coagulation

To consider the individuated revolting child of the previous chapters and the nightmare of collective resistance chronicled here, I want to return to a fairly incidental moment in *The Exorcist*— this dissertation continually looks backward to move forward,

perhaps befitting the child symbolic, both past and future in one body. This is perhaps appropriate, too, in a work studying sideways growth. Before Regan's body becomes overtaken by the spectacle of demonic queerness, pitting her against parental and patriarchal authority, her mother Chris attempts to quell another set of revolting youths. In the scene from the film in which Chris is starring, she wrestles a bullhorn from a protesting youth and attempts to pursue the rioting crowd to pursue more peaceful avenues of protest. Through cross-cutting, *The Exorcist* makes a fairly tacit link between the "revolt" of Regan's body and the revolt of the students on the campus of Georgetown University, and we could say, by extension, the entire youth movement of 1960s (anti-draft, anti-war, anti-establishment, anti-past) that intensified the generational divide. In her filmed scene, Chris is barely able to control the student riot—demanding patience and compromise from the belligerent crowd. At the same time, her child at home is increasingly escaping her control, more revolting with every passing hour. In returning to *The Exorcist* to examine the child collective film, I continue to highlight the interconnectedness of these systems of representation—the possessed child (as the child polluted and transformed) will find a perverse echo in the child collective, as the young cabal displays a corruptive appetite which draws "good" children into its fold and converts them to evil.

Indeed, the constellation of subjects chronicled in these films—surveillance, communication, and contagion—serve, in many ways, as a hyperbolic extension of the fears we have already seen. In exploring the revolting child collective, I begin by stating, simply, that the unchecked assembly of young bodies has long elicited cultural anxiety.

Delinquency is the term used to characterize every form of juvenile criminality, from truancy to property damage—fitting, perhaps, that it comes from the Latin “*linquere*,” meaning “to leave” or “to abandon.” Most succinctly, these bodies have abandoned forward movement along the proper path to adulthood. Generally, delinquency anxieties coalesce around adolescent rather than pre-adolescent bodies. Liminal, the years of adolescence occupy neither childhood nor adult terrain, and trouble the tenuous distinctions between the two. In *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erik Erikson’s classic study of psychosocial stages of development, Erikson identified adolescence as a stage of “moratorium”—a moment of delay, prior to adulthood, when a youth may explore and evaluate social roles and self-conceptions.¹² Erikson characterizes this moribund stage, structured by the psychological crisis of “identity vs. role confusion,” as a sort of death (recall Stockton’s grave metaphor for the queer child who kills the straight in self-discovery) in which the adult self will emerge from childhood. At the very least, adolescence is a “leaving behind” or “abandonment” (*linquere*) of the delimiting characteristics of childhood: vulnerability, innocence, and dependence.

An attendant fear is that childhood will be abandoned not for proper adulthood but for something more nefarious—nebulous, often undefined—criminally wrong, sexually wrong. Often the youth “falling in with the wrong crowd” characterizes this anxiety. This common turn of phrase suggests several related anxieties: first, that some triaged children are already beyond repair and recuperation; second, that all children are porous and spongelike—easily influenced by their peers; and finally, that the youth crowd is impenetrable and consuming—once within, the “good” child is lost forever. As

James Gilbert notes in *Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent*, the desire to understand and manage a new and increasingly self-contained teenage culture fueled much of the post-war “crisis” concerning youth crime. Says Gilbert, “[a]s young people grew more independent and more affluent, as their peer culture grew more influential, and their parents less so, delinquency emerged as a kind of code word for shifts in adolescent behavior that much of adult society disapproved.”¹³ Given this, it is useful to consider juvenile delinquency anxiety as a fear that the “good child” will be left behind and consumed by a monstrously autonomous and antagonistic foreign body. Where Christine McNeil pointed upstairs and screamed “That *thing* up there is not my daughter!” the adult victims of the child collective will peer out of their house, surrounded by revolting children, and say “Those *things* out there are not my children!”

When it comes to controlling potentially volatile child subjects, as with all subaltern subjects, the key lies in separation of bodies into determinate and observable disciplinary space. The child is rhetorically malleable and mobile—exceedingly so when s/he is alone, endangered, vulnerable, or frightened. But something disruptive occurs when the talk is of “the children.” Assemblies of children—together, undifferentiated, collective—inspire more fear than protectionist impulses. The child is precious commodity. *The children* run amok, consume precious resources, and overpopulate with anti-eugenic fervor.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault speaks of “disciplinary space” as an architectonic extension of social belief systems. As he explains, disciplinary space insures that “[e]ach individual has his own place; and each

place its individual.” Further, it must “[a]void distribution in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyze confused, massive or transient pluralities. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation.”¹⁴ It is this phrase “dangerous coagulation” that I find so rhetorically rich when considering children and systems of discipline. The bodily metaphor turns on the notion that assembled and halted bodies are useless to the state and indeed harmful to the functioning of a society predicated on the controlled circulation of bodies. Loitering youth are especially suspect—unproductive, unobserved, certainly up to no good. Foucault continues, stating that partitioning and individuating bodies is “a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration.”¹⁵ They are perhaps the vagrantest of vagabonds.

As Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality*, the surveillance of children, in particular their sexuality, was an imperative in the formation of a formalized educational system, so much so that modes of surveillance were built into the architectural design of childhood spaces. And of course child-rearing instruction traffics significantly in notions of observation and surveillance—from the behaviorist interventions of pre-war child-rearing ideology to the post-war Freudian-infused instruction, where parents vigilantly observed their children for signs of neurosis and stunted development. All of this consideration of disciplinary space represents a certain biopolitics—by which Foucault defined the control of subjects and power over life and death itself. As children are the most salient and overdetermined avatars of futurity, the control of their development (and even their bodily movement) represents a literal and figurative control over the future.

Indeed, if this chapter takes a decidedly Foucauldian turn, it is because the films of the revolting child collective, more than any other, are intimately concerned with surveillance, control, and collectivity.

Allow me to add one more dash of Foucault to the mix: in “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault, channeling Kant perhaps, speaks of “limit attitude,” which is a transgressive mode of critical engagement that imagines the new ways of doing and being even as they are unachievable within the present.¹⁶ The queer child, for instance, is a locus of definitional impossibility and, I argue, can only be understood through metaphor and monstrosity. Likewise, radically alternative systems of kinship require a limit attitude of possibility (found in metaphor, unauthorized pleasure, or renarrativization) that views boundaries not as enclosures but as sites of transgression and liberation.

The Child Collective

Like all of the monstrous figurations in this dissertation, the revolting child collective has a number of rhetorical antecedents that function in varying degrees and combinations. As Henry Jenkins has said, children are rhetorically adhesive and, in the absence of manufacturing their own representation, exist as a polysemic collection of varied (and often contradictory) semiotic investments. Eric Ziolkowski argues that the first representation of the monstrous child collective was in the Bible (Kings 2.23) when a group of forty-two young boys jeers and torments Elisha, the prophet. Elisha summarily curses them in the name of the Lord and two large bears appear to maul the youths.

Ziolkowski suggests that this binary opposition (sacred elder vs. profane youth) recurs throughout art and literature to the present day though his selection of materials suggests the purview of a religious studies researcher rather than a literature or media studies scholar.¹⁷ Still, religious desecration and heathenry feature largely in the cinema of revolting childhood: recall my discussion of *Omen III: The Final Conflict* in which a cabal of children commits mass infanticide in the service of the Antichrist. Similarly, *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) features a coven of pint-sized witches, the villainesses of *Don't Deliver Us from Evil* call Satan their father, and the youths of *Beware: Children at Play* are followers of the pagan beast Grendel (we witness their evil by the Anglo-Saxon poetry they quote). Perhaps only *Children of the Corn* troubles this binary, as religious dogma based in Old Testament sacrifice animates the child collective—but their worship of He Who Walks Behind the Rows suggests a perverse pagan misinterpretation of the Bible. Finally, the adult protagonists of *Who Can Kill a Child?* barricade themselves inside a church for survival, and *The Devil Times Five* more or less speaks for itself.

If not literally pagan or Satanic, the child collective generally implies something pre-Christian or pre-civilization. This should come as no surprise given that colonial projects have based their eugenic rhetoric on a kind of implied recapitulation theory, where subaltern populations are characterized explicitly as pre-civilized versions of white men (evolutionarily regressed savages) and implicitly as undeveloped children who must capitulate to white parental authority. In addition, I have also noted the work of Jacqueline Rose, Barbara Creed, and James Kincaid who argue that children's sexuality has always been understood as disturbingly pre-civilized, the barely-contained *chora* (to

borrow Kristeva's term) that must be continually disavowed in favor of "properly-aligned" object- and genital-oriented heterosexual monogamy.¹⁸

By and large, the child collective functions as a feral nightmare of evolutionary regression as children, unrestrained and undisciplined, revert to a pre-civilized state and terrorize individuated futurity-minded adult couples. Recall *Demon Seed* or *It's Alive* for those Quasimodic harbingers of futurity who yet demand inclusion within the familial, troubling its boundaries and its cohesion. The revolting child collective demands no such re-entry, but they trouble the family in other ways. Instead of challenging their willful exclusion and demanding the right of blood relations, the revolting child collective rejects biofamilial logic based in sexual difference in favor of what Leo Bersani calls "homo-ness," a revaluing of sameness in which "homo-ness itself necessitates a massive redefining of relationality."¹⁹ What draws the revolting children together is a mass and massive rejection of heteronormative reproductive futurity.

The first filmic instance of a monstrous child collective appears deeply entrenched and intertwined in monstrous queer sexuality. In the adaptation of Tennessee William's gothic play *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), the child collective acts as a sort of faceless, carnivorous mob delivering nature's retribution. At the film's climax, Catherine (Elizabeth Taylor) narrates the murder of queer monster Sebastian at their hands. After having sex with several of the boys from a small Spanish village, Sebastian is hunted down and eaten alive by the objects of his desire in a sequence meant to resemble the monster's lynching in *Frankenstein* (1931). The children, dark-skinned and "ethnic" next to Taylor's milky white skin, are the product of an uncivilized, taboo-and-totem society.

Here queerness becomes aligned with whiteness and colonial power—Sebastian courts his own demise playing with the feral youths of this remote village. Indeed, the introduction of Sebastian’s queerness seems to upset the fragile balance of the foreign land as if it is releasing the bestiality of its citizenry as it expurgates the community of its queer interloper. Fittingly, consumption and incorporation thematically underpin this film, as it will all of the revolting child collective films. By consuming Sebastian’s flesh, the children make him part of the bestial mob. Indeed, the film aligns Sebastian with the child monsters throughout the film: like them, he is a predator; like them, he has an insatiable appetite for flesh; like them, he remains faceless throughout the entire film.

Only a few years later, Peter Brooks’s adaptation of *The Lord of the Flies* (1963) would bring another group of savage young boys to the screen. Like William Golding’s novel, the film offers an allegorical meditation on man’s true nature, offering that in the absence of order and governance, even children (or especially children) will revert to a pre-civilized, savage state. There is some question in the work as to causality—are the children recapitulating “adult” systems of power and warfare? Is this a critique of Fascism and groupthink or a Calvinist fable about man’s inherent sinfulness from birth? Without delving too deeply into this much-analyzed text, I want to underscore the manner in which existing discourses about monstrous childhood inform this film and how *The Lord of the Flies* shapes future discourses about childhood monstrosity. The film, shot in a raw, cinema-verité style with largely non-actors, takes aim most directly at the nostalgic, Romantic view of childhood, which holds that children are most pure and innocent in the absence of corrupting civilization. Indeed, the film seems to suggest that

civilization keeps children from being *too* childlike. Like Rhoda Penmark, they become grotesque extensions of normative childhood. Without surveillance and disciplinary space, they regress to a pre-civilized state in a eugenic spectacle of *imprecise distributions, diffuse circulation, and unusable and dangerous coagulation*. Echoes and associations flow freely now between the texts. I would recall Regan McNeil's "regression" in *The Exorcist* and its allegorical ties to the "pre-civilized" non-Christian Middle East. Regan's loss of self pulls in other totems as well: her innocence, her heterosexuality, her whiteness, her humanity. Like Carrie White, she is the near-animal in the absence of these markers and the Child of Nature looks perversely like the Feral Child when not swathed in innocence. The films of the revolting child collective witness an animalizing disposition: David Cronenberg's *The Brood* stands as the most apparent example, managing to anthropomorphize both mother and her offspring as Nora gives birth to a litter of deformed children. In *Who Can Kill a Child?*, the film visually quotes large sequences from *The Birds*, as children congregate like a murder of crows waiting to dispatch their unwitting prey. Revealingly, Edelman examines Hitchcock's film as an exemplar of the anti-family, anti-heteronormative, anti-reproductive futurity pleasure that he finds in his selected texts. The suitability of *Who Can Kill a Child?* for Edelman's polemic is no less sanguine: moreso, even, as the revenge of the future upon the present is no doubt the apotheosis of a queer negativity without a hope for the foreseeable future.

These literary antecedents and these cinematic texts (*Suddenly*, *Last Summer* and *The Lord of the Flies*—along with the *Village of the Damned* series) form the discursive structure of the revolting child collective in the Cold War—a symbolic manifestation of

alternative systems of kinship and consuming futurity. The juvenile delinquency (“JD”) film, as seen in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) or *The Wild One* (1953) shares a similar discursive terrain in its fear of an impenetrable and isolated youth culture. *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) is credited with bringing the problem of juvenile delinquency to the middle class and simultaneously suggesting that the breakdown of the family unit—particularly the inversion of traditional gender roles—is partially to blame. Exploitative imitators followed, mostly promoted to teenage audiences, and these films on the “danger,” and yet the thrill, of juvenile delinquency became a reference point for an increasingly calcified teen culture resulting in, as Gilbert says, “no clear line between what is teen culture and what is juvenile delinquency.”²⁰ During the Cold War crisis, children’s bodies became the primary symbolic battlegrounds for political ideology. To J. Edgar Hoover, delinquents were an “undercover army” who sought to destroy the very fabric of American society from the inside out. They were “the traitor, the vile enemy in our political family which seeks to disrupt our institutions of government; who knives from within; who has only selfish purposes who is the antagonist of everything that is honorable in our present-day form of government.”²¹ This characterization should resonate with previous depictions of both revolting children and queers: Sabine Bussing called monstrous children “aliens in the home”; Stockton referred to the gay child as “a stranger in the home.” So easily elided, the monstrous child and queer brandish “knives from within,” part of and yet incompatible with the family and the state—“antagonist[s] of everything that is honorable in our present-day form of government,” to return to Hoover’s panicked portend.

A few other child collectives in the Cold War are less pedophobic: *These Are the Damned* (1963) feature radioactive children who are held prisoner by the military industrial complex and who will repopulate the world after an inevitable nuclear fallout. *The Space Children* (1958) has a group of children join forces with an alien entity to stave off an apocalyptic nuclear war on Earth. Though disturbingly empty and easily manipulated, the children of these films ultimately maintain their innocence and thus their claims to normative childhood, and stand as avatars for a better, wholly recognizable future.

With this background established, I now turn to this chapter's central texts and engage their scenarios of child empowerment over adult subjects. *Village of the Damned* has been addressed, but several more contemporary films also draw upon this figuration.

In *Who Can Kill a Child?*²² (1975), vacationing British couple Tom (Lewis Fiander) and Evie (Prunella Ransome) travel to the Spanish island of Almanzora to find the village populated only by unusual mute and secretive children. They discover that the children have revolted and murdered the adults in the village the day before, during Carnivale—an act that they refer to as “the game.” Evie, who is pregnant, dies in what seems like an act of violence by her fetus against her, and Tom gruesomely murders several children to make his escape. In the final act, neighboring police officials murder Tom after seeing him attacking the children, and the children respond by murdering the policemen with their own firearms. As the film closes, the children plan a trip to the mainland to recruit other children in their game. Perhaps the most striking feature of the film, however, is its six-minute opening credits that plays out over the stock footage of

human war atrocities that disproportionately victimized children, provocatively suggesting a revenge narrative.

The cult film *The Children* (1980), advertised with the tagline “Thank God they’re somebody else’s!,” features a group of five children (like *Devil Times Five*) who are transformed into black-fingernailed zombies by a radioactive cloud. Recalling *These Are the Damned*, the irradiated children trounce through town, killing the townsfolk foolish enough to hug them—an act which immediately incinerates the victims. The children eventually converge upon John (Martin Shakar), his pregnant wife Cathy (Gale Garnett), and their young son (Jessie Abrams) who must destroy the revolting children, including the couple’s daughter, Jenny (Clara Evans). They defeat the children by severing their hands (instruments of their homicidal hugging), and the film ends with the couple delivering their newborn amidst dismembered child bodies... only to discover the infant’s zombified black fingernails. This film shares common ground with *The Bad Seed* in the manner that cult audiences have taken up its narrative excesses with campy glee.²³

*Children of the Corn*²⁴ (1984) finds newlyweds Burt (Peter Horton) and Vicki (Linda Hamilton) searching for aid in Gaitlin, Nebraska, after accidentally striking a child with their car during a cross-country trip. Finding the town abandoned, they are stalked by a cult of youths who had murdered all of the adult townspeople as sacrifices to their pagan god, “He Who Walks Behind the Rows.” The town is held in stasis, and the calendar in the town bar still reads 1963, as if time has not moved in many years. Burt is ultimately able to rescue Vicki and two innocent youths (who, of course, become their

adopted children) by destroying the cornfield that seems to have a supernatural hold over the children.

Beware: Children at Play (1989), produced by horror-comedy schlock studio Troma Entertainment, is dubbed “the most extreme” picture created by the studio. Troma also holds as a badge of honor that half of its audience walked out in the film’s epic child-snuffing finale.²⁵ In the film, a string of child disappearances worries the residents of a small rural town until they discover that the children have joined a cannibalistic cult that worships the ancient beast Grendel. The adults band together and with shotguns, machetes, and pitchforks take to the forest to murder their zombified offspring in a bloody finale. The film ends in massive carnage as a single boy survives, off to bring new children into the fold.

Finally, the 2008 film *The Children* (not an official remake) takes place during a relaxing Christmas vacation in England. Elaine (Eva Birthistle), her husband Jonah (Stephen Campbell Moore), their teenage daughter Casey (Hannah Tointon), and two children join Elaine’s sister and brother-in-law along with their two children. The youths become increasingly violent and homicidal, seemingly spurred on by an unknown vector. Only Casey sees the children for dangerous monsters, but she is blamed for the events as the children cunningly cover their crimes with the performance of innocence. The film ends with Elaine acceding to Casey’s claims and, after running over her younger daughter with a car, she and Casey drive away.

Child’s Play

A continuing theme in this dissertation is the manner in which revolting children utilize the codes and semiotic markers of childhood to achieve sinister ends. A recurring dramatic strategy in the films occurs when a child “performs” childhood innocence (the Innocent reveals him/herself to be the Watcher) in order to ensnare an adult into letting his/her guard down at which point a swarm of children attack the unsuspecting adult. In *Who Can Kill a Child?*, for instance, the only remaining adult survivor on the island is lured away from the vacationing British couple by his daughter who cries and pleads, “Please father... please help me.” As she takes his hand, the British couple begs him, “Please stay here,” to which the father responds, “She’s my daughter.” Then the father is led down the street where an awaiting pack of children savagely beat him to death. Similarly, the B-movie *The Children*, in which radioactive children destroy adults by hugging them, the children destroy their parents by begging, zombie-like, for affection—more than a passing reference to the paralyzed mother unable to destroy her zombified daughter in *Night of the Living Dead*. But the frightening element of this mode of manipulation/attack is the manner in which children are able to manipulate adults by performing their interpellated role as “child,” or to recall Lori Merrick, to expose “cuteness” as performable. This performance finds most succinct expression in the close of *Who Could Kill a Child?* as the crying children perform their childlike defenselessness in order to interpellate the arriving officers as saviors. In a spectacular moment, the boys’ and girls’ tearful cries turn to laughs as they unload the guns off of the policemen’s boat and summarily gun down the men. The fetishization of child dependency goes topsy-turvy here as tears turn to derisive laughter. Where once a child’s amusement was pure

testimony of innocence and purity, here laughter is a sign of sadistic pleasure. Within a constellation of perverse desire, laughter marks the transgression of the child from playful Trickster to malicious Demon. Indeed, this is perverse manifestation of child knowledge over adult ignorance. What these films do, in much the same way that *The Bad Seed* was able to do with the iconography of Shirley Temple, is to dislocate cuteness, vulnerability, the very “stuff” of childhood innocence into the terrain of the terrible.

One of the monstrous elements of the revolting child collective is the manner in which they, even moreso than Rhoda Penmark, refigure the meaning of “play.” The function of “play,” like all normative childhood characteristics, is to codify a period of not-adulthood—nostalgically rendered and forever endangered of being lost. When children can no longer play (and play in the proper way), childhood is lost forever. As Patricia Holland notes, “[p]lay is the opposite of work; it turns irresponsibility into pleasure; and it is legitimized by childish dependence. Play is an expression of euphoric values—of freedom, authenticity, purposefulness, creativity, and above all enjoyment of fun.”²⁶ Like *The Bad Seed*, these films use “play” as something horrifying—the Dreamer becomes the Destroyer, as I mentioned in the introduction, when children’s play invades the adult world and is wielded as a weapon. Rhoda may have used her tap shoes to kill young Claude Daigle, but the child collective has other toys at their disposal. In *Bloody Birthday*, murderous moppet Sherrie strangles a teenage boy with her jump rope. In *The Children* (2008), a young girl murders her aunt by shoving a crayon in her eye. In *Who Can Kill a Child?*, a gaggle of youths giggle while they string up an elderly man and play “piñata” with pitchforks and other gruesome implements. The irony of treating play as

the apotheosis of frivolity and childhood innocence is that children are rarely allowed to play in isolation. Play is precarious, always teetering on violence: psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, after all, treated all play as a sublimated form of child rage. The revolting child collective, once they have disposed of their town's adult residents, treat new arrivals as new toys—new objects of aggression and gruesome creativity. In a similar vein, Holland describes the playground as a site of dangerous coagulation: “[t]he playground image itself may be seem as a threat, infested by bullies and children running wild. Play itself is linked to uncontrollability and the fear that children may move beyond the reach of the school's disciplinary regime.”²⁷ The play of revolting childhood is play with a purpose, murderous and wonton, eliding the division between useless play and useful labor. Dislocated from frivolity, like the violent, militarized boys of *The Lord of the Flies*, the play of revolting children combines the inaccessibility of childhood imagination with the motivation of a selfish, careless, and violent adult culture.

If play is something distinctly linked with youth and distinctly opposed to adulthood, then something is inherently revolutionary about play. Here I return to the epigraph that began this chapter: Richard Neville, author and activist, writes that *play* is what unites his fellow activists in “love and laughter,” creating a utopist community that is “equi-sexual” and “inter-racial.” To Neville, play is inherently political—the embrace of play is a rejection of hegemonically-defined “responsibility.” There is something queer about play in that it is a rejection of maturity—of heterosexual adulthood. The failure of youth culture to *grow up*, as “growing up” is defined as entering into matrimony and joining the corporate labor force, is defined as an act of “delinquency,” a disquieting

rejection of normative growth. As Dick Hebdige notes in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, which explores (in part) the playfulness with which British youth culture rejected respectability in favor of frivolity and fun in their self-expression, the eruption of youth delinquency into the public sphere occurs when youths “play with the only power at their disposal: the power to discomfort.”²⁸

Play is a discomfoting abandonment, a delinquency from the narrative of development, wherein the fantasies of childhood are abandoned to enter into the social contract of maturity and procreation. Those miniature versions of former selves, meanwhile, will allow the sublimation of melancholy over the loss of childhood. Such is heteronormalcy. Consider how often queerness is characterized as a flight: from being a proper woman/man, from men (or from women), from responsibility, from family, from fulfillment, from religion. Queerness is seen as a willful delinquency from normalcy itself. As Diederick Janssen notes in “Re-Queering Queer Youth Development: A Post-Developmental Approach to Childhood and Pedagogy,” the notion of play as political resistance has a certain credence for queerness, as play “is basic to the notion of the queer (playing with or against the laws of normality).”²⁹ This “brotherhood of clowns” that Neville proposes recalls the larvated queer subjects who observed and critiqued straight culture from behind their masks.

Certainly I could return to camp production and reception as evidence of this playing with the laws of normalcy. I have already noted in chapter one the manner in which camp revalues and repurposes texts for unauthorized and perverse pleasure. In *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*, Matthew Tinkcom’s Marxist

analysis of queer labor practices in cinema articulates a theory of “work-as-play” as a hallmark of queer camp production.³⁰ Indeed, camp has always had an antagonistic relationship to regimes of hierarchical value—as Susan Sontag says, “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. More precisely, Camp involved a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”³¹ One could also note, as Richard Dyer does in “So Camp as to Keep Us Going,” that camp, as a playful worldview, functions as a prophylactic for queers against repressive and homophobic forces in one’s daily life. As Neville notes, the ability to play—to be serious about the frivolous, and frivolous about the serious—is a “survival strategy for the future, the laughing gas to counteract tomorrow’s Mace.”³²

I chose this quote to start this chapter because I believe that it encapsulates so many of the disparate strains found in this collection of films: play as disruptive to systems of power, the formation of community based in mutual opposition, the rejection of heteronormativity as juvenile delinquency, and finally, “onward to the future, Motherfuckers”—the defiant, profane, marching beat of consuming futurity and non-normative growth.

The Children are Watching

If one of the most recalcitrant discourses about childhood is the need to “guide” development towards maturity and proper heteronormative development and away from the undefined but queerly-characterized perils of developmental stasis, then surveillance becomes unerringly central. I have already noted Foucault’s biopolitical analysis of

bodies, easily applied to the architectonics of the educational system. This strain runs throughout educational policy—even the most progressive of child education advocates like Maria Montessori warned against a false “mask of seamliness” that would impede proper observation of children.

One of the most pervasive commonalities among the films is the emphasis on children observing adults. In the films which involve adults entering the child-community space (which describes *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*, *These Are the Damned*, *It's Alive II: Island of the Alive*, all eight of the *Children of the Corn* movies, *Wicked Little Things*, and *In the Playground*), essentially the same scene is played out in every film: the adults arrive to find the town deserted; they are often led about by a child glimpsed in the distance or the periphery; and the viewer is provided prolonged sequences of a non-focalized perspective as the protagonists are observed and stalked by the children. This recalls the danger of a Watcher like Rhoda Penmark who elicits horror because she seems to collect information and harbor inappropriate knowledge behind her mask of seamliness.

A community of Watchers, the revolting child collective not only observes and accrues knowledge but shares it as well. After the adult “discovery” of the child collective, the mass of children invariably chase the adults through the streets of the abandoned town. In its particularly rich homage to Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, *Who Can Kill a Child?* has its adult couple walk, excruciatingly slowly, out of a house and through a flock of silently observant children perched on rocks and cars. Indeed, this notion that the children have eyes everywhere is a recurring thematic in the films. The adults are, in a

quite literal way, surrounded by multitudes of children. In this, it is the children who control the dangerous coagulation of adults. Non-adherents to zero growth, the children are fruitful and multiply seemingly without need for heterosexual reproduction. In fact, they surround heterosexual couples with their perverse fecundity.

It is surveillance relations—the power to know, to diagnose and pathologize, and to control movement—that shore up the structural integrity of child/parent relationships. By divorcing children from the signifiers of childhood or exaggerating them to grotesque proportions, revolting children (always border-crossers) upset the dichotomy that upends “adulthood” and allows heteronormative maturity to be understood as an inevitable destination. As Holland notes,

[T]hese negative definitions allow abstract ‘childhood’ to be a depository for many precious qualities that ‘adulthood’ needs but which are incompatible with adult status; qualities such as impulsiveness, playfulness, emotional expressiveness, indulgence in fantasy, sexual innocence. Hence the dichotomy child/adult parallels other dichotomies that have characterized western discourse: nature/culture, primitive/civilized, emotion/reason. In each pair the dominant term seeks to understand and control the subordinate, keeping it separate but using it for its own enrichment.³³

In these films, those power relations are inverted—the child becomes the parent, and the parent becomes the child: restricted, ignorant, and helpless. Indeed, something is perversely and erroneously advanced about this situation. These children are individuals who will, eventually, take command of these spaces. This is, in fact, a cultural expectation. Even in films where the adults have not crossed the boundary *into* the child collective space (as in *Village of the Damned*), the children soon take over their hometown and control the movements of the adults. Several films make this an actuality, often providing the films’ most artistic moments with high or low angle shots to

accentuate the entrapment of the adult characters, indeed their infantilization at the hands of the revolting children. Though the future is for the children, held in trust, these films terrify because the young have taken agency too soon; they have taken control before adult society has deemed them “fit.” The revolting youth reform the disciplinary structure of social hierarchies before being properly guided out of the dangerous parts of childhood: polymorphously perverse, inexhaustibly imaginative, and ideologically hostile, they threaten the foundation of the normative trajectory that upends reproductive futurity.

For the queerly-aligned spectator, this produces a curious mix of possibilities: the pleasurable revolt of the child against the heteronormative agents of power, the perversion of the child itself—anti-queer symbolic par excellence, and the joy of witnessing heterosexual privilege and compulsory reproduction turned upon itself. Ultimately, however, I find that the films of the child collective offer the greatest impasse to unproblematic identification with their revolting children. Undifferentiated, faceless, they offer little to “hold onto” as might be found in a Rhoda Penmark, a Regan McNeil, or even an *It's Alive* infant. As Elizabeth Cowie notes, however, fantasy activates more than simply identificatory alignments, subject to subject. The *mise-en-scène* of desire, however, is “the putting into a scene or staging of desire.”³⁴ Identification here is with the *mise-en-scène* of conflict. In this way it is related to the other films, but where every other revolting child film functioned within a *mise-en-scène* of isolation (hiding, rage, rejection), this series alights in the possibility of collective resistance and retaliation.

So long isolated and unattached to community, the queer spectator gleans a certain pleasure in the fantasy of being part of a mass against the futility of the few. That the metaphor of generational conflict—a repudiation of the past by the future—subtends this fantasy, allows for the specter of belief in progress. This is a scorched earth policy of progress to be sure, and not development as heteronormative development has been defined, but a sideways growth nonetheless. Echoing perhaps Mikhail Bakhtin and his theorization of subaltern resistance, Judith Butler admits that the greatest potential for social upheaval may come from “savoring the status of unthinkability, if it is a status, as the most critical, the most radical, the most valuable.”³⁵ Illegitimacy, the disavowed inconceivable, are “nonplaces in which one finds oneself in spite of oneself,” says Butler. “Indeed, these are nonplaces where recognition, including self-recognition, proves precarious if not elusive... They are not sites of enunciation, but shifts in the topography from which an audible claim emerges, the claim of the not-yet-subject and the nearly unrecognizable.”³⁶ Indeed, this series most closely approximates Edelman’s dream of a sinthomosexuality thick with Thanatos. As he says, queerness must accept “the place of the social order’s death drive... [and it] attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure.”³⁷ The pleasure of the cinematic, and of horror in particular, is that it allows for the impossibility of Edelman’s rhetoric as praxis—identification with the *mise-en-scène* of collective resistance and societal annihilation is a limit horizon of an evitable futurity.

On Children's Nature

In each of the films, the motivation for the formation of the child collectives is fairly opaque. In *Village of the Damned*, both science and the military are at a loss to explain the children's arrival and the nature of their intentions. Huddled together around an oblong table, they debate theories of origin, ultimately going nowhere. They are, it seems, completely unequipped to explain the nature of these unnatural children. *The Children* (2008) leaves its corrupting pathogen similarly unexplained. In *Who Can Kill a Child?* and *Children of the Corn* unequipped tourists make half-hearted attempts to explain the mostrosity: the children of Gaitlin have come under the control of a pagan god; the children of Almazora might "have some instinct or have had some evolutionary development" that has led to a type of patri/matricidal madness. In fact, what is fairly remarkable about these films is the complete lack of what Andrew Tudor calls the "expert" figure, either as a scientist or one of his/her replacements (psychiatrist, seer, old man/woman, book of lore, scientific text, archived documents).³⁸

Most of the films, however, leave the explanation up to some unexplainable, or perhaps incidental, cause related to notions of survival or social Darwinism. It is perhaps *Who Can Kill a Child?* which is most provocative in this regard. Its framing narrative suggests (with information available to the viewer but not the protagonist) that these children—and by extension, all children—constitute a justifiable revolution against the adults who systematically murder them in genocidal numbers through acts of aggression towards one another. Indeed, the title of the film itself is trenchantly ironic: adults in the film anxiously debate the ethical implications of murdering a single child for survival

while, culturally, thousands of children die every day due to war and lack of adult intervention. Indeed, further inquiry into this film reveals its links *The Birds* to be more than cosmetic: likewise, Hitchcock's film suggested a form of evolutionary revenge which allowed disparate species of birds to band together against a common enemy. Indeed, *The Birds* can be seen as a progenitor of what Tudor refers to as the "supernature" horror film that would dominate the genre in the 1970s, in which man is threatened by "the exceptional malevolence of supernature often directed at the innocent self."³⁹

As in the supernature films, the revolting children turn suddenly upon their adult counterparts, seemingly without warning or cause. A collective of Aliens, they arrive with no discernable origin. All territorializing, totalizing progress, they are a future without a past. The queer child is this kind of pastless monstrosity—the uncreated creation who (as Stockton notes) must kill the straight child in order to come into being. The queer adult, too, never was a queer child but a straight child who ceased existence when s/he was (pick your metaphor) led astray, possessed, corrupted, lost, damaged, or killed. In the good child's place is something hedonistic, selfish, libidinally-obsessed, and unconcerned with continuing its legacy or its family line. In "The Future is a Monster," Amit Rai takes up the image of Dorian Gray, a queer monster if ever there was one, to articulate a notion of the "degraded monster" which gives itself over to "unrestrained expenditure... [t]he eternal present of the sensual animal. The degraded monster," says Rai, "is a body satisfying its hunger for sensation without any regard for the future."⁴⁰ The word choice here should resonate with any individual who has encountered the anti-

queer diatribes of the religious Right or the normalizing rhetoric of conservative gay agencies. Ellis Hanson's article "Undead" offers a compelling analysis of the characterization of queer men (particularly during the AIDS crisis) as diseased pariahs, endlessly fucking their way into nihilistic oblivion.⁴¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that the queer futurity of the revolting child collective is wed to an attendant anxiety about influence, contagion, and disease. Queers, like revolting children, seem to come from all places, from all homes and all backgrounds: "We Are Everywhere" was the popular rallying cry of the queer movement in the late sixties. Like revolting children, the search for causality and origins fascinates and frustrates the public imaginary. And like revolting children, their dangerous coagulation breeds fear and resentment, as does the insularity and influence of their culture.

The Eyes That Hypnotize

First a bookish digression: I started my graduate career as an English literature scholar, and in some ways my frame of reference is still divided. However, it was reading William March's novel *The Bad Seed* which led me, eventually, to my dissertation, so to what end should I question? My work on this chapter reminded me of another favorite text—also from the Cold War era, also from a queer author, also about a troubled/troublesome little girl. Like this chapter, Carson McCuller's 1946 novel *A Member of the Wedding* concerns freakishness, belonging, and the terror/pleasure of outsider community. In *A Member of the Wedding*, tomboy and proto-lesbian child Frankie Addams is described as "an unjoined person who hung around in doorways,"⁴² a

fitting description of any of the dangerously liminal and abjected youths in this dissertation. Frankie's crisis is that she belongs to no community, and even as a member of her brother's impending wedding, she is somehow outside the bounds of heteronormative behavior and ritual. Indeed, it is only when she encounters a traveling freak show that she glimpses a moment of that possible community—a recognition of sameness (or “homo-ness,” in Bersani's terms⁴³) that disturbs her deeply. Fittingly, she makes this realization when she enters the tent of the “Half-Man Half-Woman, a morphidite and miracle of science.” Writes McCullers:

Half the face was dark-bearded and the other half bright glazed with paint. Both eyes were strange. Frankie had wondered around the tent and looked at every booth. She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes. And all the year she had remembered them, until this day.

“I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding,” she said. “Those Freaks.”⁴⁴

As in *Village of the Damned*, whose children have “eyes with the power to paralyze,” the freak gaze holds an arresting potential for disrupting the social order. In *A Member of the Wedding*, the freaks offer a disturbing queer alterity—they never “get married or go to a wedding,” Frankie suspects. Once a year, Frankie experiences the uncanny terror/pleasure of that alternative to the systems of heterosexual kinship which have abjected her—unable, yet, to meet their gaze and “connect their eyes with hers.” As in the films in this chapter, the gaze of the outsider stands as something powerful and dangerous to notions of individuated selfhood. The freaks represent a dangerous interpellation, able to recognize those who are, in fact, freaks themselves. Linda

Williams's insightful realignment of horror film looking relations in her article "When a Woman Looks" argues that the terrified look is not the woman's horror of oppositional difference, but rather "her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing."⁴⁵ Likewise, the gaze of the Watcher in the cinema of revolting childhood has the power to resist, recognize, and recruit. It seems not so much of a stretch, given the ample arsenal of evidence that links revolting child and queer subject to reference that very queer practice of *cruising*, in which gay men utilize silent codes of looking relations to identify one another for sexual contact. Indeed, this anxiety about infiltration and queerness has long been linked to the secret code of communication among men. Even on the floor of the House of Representatives in 1950, Senator Miller of Nebraska warned that the "invisible menace" was transmitting cryptic messages in plain view, stating "[t]hose people [homosexuals] like to be known to each other. They have signs used on streetcars and in public places to call attention to others of like mind."⁴⁶ The horror of the gays/gaze in the heart of masculine paranoia is the fear of (mis)recognition—those long freak eyes.

Indeed, the cinema of revolting childhood seems preternaturally obsessed with the power of the child's gaze. This is a curious development given that "childhood," as a representational system, is constructed largely for the polysemic needs of adults. As Patricia Holland notes, "the adult gaze seeks to put children in their place and to conform their image to expected patterns. The look is a dual one of power and pleasure: the power that comes from adults' superior knowledge of their subject, the pleasure from the beauty

and seductiveness of childhood. Subject to an adult gaze, children must accept that power and grant that pleasure.”⁴⁷

I have noted the ways in which these child collective films subvert power relations through the focusing upon the gaze of the child at the adult—a collective gaze that grants the children superior knowledge over their subjects. Linked with the notion of surveillance is the films’ preoccupation with the eyes of the children, but children’s eyes and their looking relations hold much more significance in the cinematic representation of bad childhood (and I would argue, *childhood*) as a whole. In fact, during the course of writing this dissertation, I was struck how often *bad or powerful children* and *eyes* were connected. I thought about the emphasis on Carrie White’s eyes during her telekinetic rage, the glowing eyes of the psychic children in *The Fury* (1978), the large wandering eye of Sadaku in *Ringu* (1998), the eyes of the magical children in pedestrian Disney fare like *Escape to Witch Mountain* (1975) and *Return from Witch Mountain* (1978), or Rosemary plaintively asking of the coven “what have you done with his *eyes*, you maniacs?”

The eyes of children in these films represent more than simply the passive gaze of the victimized child, something expected in horror cinema—and in cinema more generally. Rather, the look of the Watcher is potent, empowered, and invasive; in the words of Carol Clover, it is “an assaultive gaze.”⁴⁸ Harboring knowledge inappropriate with the body of a child, the Innocent and the Wise Child seem grotesquely transformed by knowledge and desire, emerging as the calculating Watcher and the unknowable Alien. Indeed, the surveillance that the children command is intimately connected with

their ability to observe and “read” adults, as in the *Village of the Damned* children’s mind-reading skills.⁴⁹ Recall Regan McNeil’s terrible turn in *The Exorcist*: in her demonic form, she had the ability to “look into” Father Karras’s heart and read his guilty conscience. In *Village of the Damned*, though, the eyes are linked to other abilities as well: the children are able, through visual (and one assumes from there, mental) contact, so impose their will upon others. As the poster design for the film states, “Beware the stare that will paralyze the will of the world.” These words “paralyze” and “hypnotize” and the description of the children’s eyes as “arresting” all suggest stasis and immobility. The children have the ability, through seeing and knowing, to halt and control the will of others. In the subgenre as a whole, children also use sight to communicate silently. Indeed, the very nature of their silence places them outside the realm of the natural. Moreso, this thematic marks almost every film within the subgenre: linked intimately to the notion of a hive mind, children in these films seem to communicate through looking relations in a way that seems impenetrable to adults. In *Who Can Kill a Child?*, for instance, looking relations between children are shown to be the mode of transmission of the murderous impulse. In a later scene, the “bad” children stumble upon a group of “good” children, hold their gaze for a period of time, and then the formerly good children go off to attack their parents.

In this, the look of the children is not only manipulative but infectious as well. Certainly this motif has links to juvenile delinquency rhetoric. The possibility of “good” kids turning “bad” through the influence of an undesirable peer group remains a historically consistent anxiety. The Cold War, through, with its particular cycle of

outrage, marks an especially fevered period of anxiety as youth culture became increasingly autonomous and unrecognizable. As Joel Best notes, “[t]he 1960s seemed to offer an especially imposing array of temptations for the young, including drugs, sexual freedom, and political radicalism... Pundits worried, not just about the friction between parents and their children, but also about the gulf between society and its youth—the generation gap. Something horrible was happening to the next generation; they were turning their backs on the old ways. They were becoming monsters.”⁵⁰

In the cinema of revolting childhood, the becoming-monster of the next generation is queerly tinged as they form alternative and unrecognizable forms of kinship relations in opposition to the familial. They represent a biological alterity—a nonreproductive duplication of forces predicated in an infectious multiplicity. The revolting child collective films recruit and increase their numbers, growing sideways as they accrue bodies and power. Tauntingly, they call out to heterosexuality and the social order—your angelic child may be the next to join our ranks... your child does not belong to you, your family line, your family legacy. As the trailer to the trailer to *Beware: Children at Play* promises, “The demon has come to enroll your children in the school of evil!” This invocation of a “school” where children learn to be evil echoes the Cold War anxiety about alternative educational systems that would turn children into mindless emissaries of a totalitarian state. Of these alternative models, Margaret Mead and Elena Calas described the state of Soviet child-rearing in 1955 as a factory for the production of compliant, unquestioning citizens—this, as opposed to the American system which privileged spontaneity and naturalness. In its most extreme form, Mead suggests that “the

end product of this type of approach were children who, like the Hitler Youth before them, would report on their own parents if their upbringing diverged from accepted state practice.”⁵¹

Not surprisingly, such anxieties concerning recruitment and contagion have long been wed to depictions of gays and lesbians. From pedophilic and predatory gay men to sadistic lesbian schoolteachers, the proximity of queers to children has long elicited hateful anxiety on the part of conservative pundits. The American Family Association, one of the leading homophobia-as-family-values organizations in the public sphere characterizes this anxiety with a fevered paranoia appropriate in any horror film:

“Homosexual activists have a vision for tomorrow, for an America in which their lifestyle is not simply tolerated but celebrated. And to achieve that vision activists have begun enlisting their footsoldiers for tomorrow’s army: *children* [emphasis theirs].”⁵²

To the revolting child collective, the corrupted and perverted child belongs to something more nebulous: youth culture, progress, anti-heteronormativity, the future itself: “tomorrow’s army.” The power of the gaze in these films can interpellate and incorporate; it is arresting and assaultive; it inverts patriarchal structures of dominance and knowledge.

The Case for Child Snuffing

As noted in the last chapter, one of the major structural tensions in the revolting child film is the manner in which the film balances its audience, precariously, between the social taboo against child abuse and a desire to see a child physically punished for

his/her transgressions. I believe this structural tension could also be explained through identificatory relations: the film positions the spectator to identify with both the adult protagonist(s) and the monstrous child simultaneously. These films satiate our desire for both spectator positions by allowing the children to exercise rage against adult systems of heteronormativity, domesticity, and civility, and then they ultimately, as William Paul puts it, make “the case for child abuse” by providing justifiable rationales. Or to put it as succinctly as the trailer for *Beware: Children at Play* does, “Now the only way to discipline your children is with a 12-gauge shotgun!”

The sequences in which children terrorize adults by chasing them through an abandoned town, for instance, provide a useful illustration of how this spectatorial investment is transferred. At first the parent victims are introduced to individual children who seem troubled, damaged, or lost: *Beware: Children at Play* begins with parental trauma, as adults search for lost children; *The Children* (1980) chronicles a similar search for children supposedly victims of a bus accident; *The Children* (2008) begins with a single sick child who will become a vector for monstrosity. Their differentiated single bodies give way, though, to dangerous coagulation as their numbers escalate. Soon they are faceless and indeterminable. The solitary faces of the adults are pitted against the marauding hordes of undifferentiated children. Beyond simple adult survival, such a rationale is necessary: as Evie says in *Who Could Kill a Child?*, “Do the children realize what they’re doing? A normal child isn’t capable of killing an adult.” Indeed, the notion of *normalcy* is the fulcrum on which the ethical scales rest. The social taboo against child abuse, and in all these films, *child murder*, is severely weakened by two elements.

First, the children are made abnormal by some form of alienation: they are deemed actual aliens (*Village of the Damned*) and therefore *were never* the parents' "real" (i.e., natural, worthy) children; possessed or zombified (*Blood on Satan's Claw*, *The Children*) and therefore *no longer* the parents' "real" children; or of a lower-class status (*Who Could Kill a Child?* or *Children of the Corn*) and/or foreign (*Who Could Kill a Child?* or *Suddenly Last Summer*). Second, the films are constructed in such a way that the adults are authorized to assault and murder the children to save "more worthy" innocent "adopted" children (*Corn of the Corn*) or their own innocent children who are often unborn (*Who Could Kill a Child* and *The Children*). This rationale, that tired policy of "splitting" into good and bad, allows for a high degree of latitude to punish child bodies under the guise of child rescue. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Howard Stein note in "Child Abuse and the Unconscious," it is "under the fantasy of the political sacrifice and rescue of children, it is the 'bad' (i.e. impulsive, lazy, aggressive, sexual) children who are being disciplined and purged (to a great extent representing the young members of already stigmatized and therefore suspect and vulnerable ethnic, racial, and class minorities), and it is the 'good' (i.e. innocent, a-sexual) children who are understood as rescued."⁵³ The unkind unkind of revolting childhood are invariably pitted against their more deserving and properly-kinded oppositions. Innocent, endangered, docile, developing, the rescued stand in direct opposition to the collective, aggressive, developmentally arrested, and family-destroying bodies of the revolting child collective.

Though these chase scenes resemble sequences that one may expect from a traditional zombie film, these are different in that adults seem paralyzed by their inability

to defend themselves against children—as much trapped by the marauding children as by the social taboo against child abuse. The children, in these sequences, seem to be everywhere, forming walls of bodies to impede movement down one alleyway or another, standing in doorways and looking out through windows, observing and somehow communicating and hunting as one entity. The “success” of the parent-victims in these films is judged by their ability to weigh ethically the proposition “Who Can Kill a Child?” and, with shotgun cocked, scream, “I can!” for the future.

Kinship and Normative Sexuality

Indeed, the films as a whole point towards a conspiratorial anxiety surrounding children, specifically in reference to their closed system of communication and their general opacity in terms of adult understanding of children. In these films, however, such anxieties are hyperbolized as the child-as-collective functions within a hive mentality: in *Village of the Damned*, for instance, the children literally have one group mind that shares knowledge, so much so that when one child learns, all of the children gain that information. Even when removed from a science-fiction context, the films continue to utilize the hive mentality to characterize the children. In all the films, the children travel en masse and work together to surround their prey, they seem to know intuitively when one of their own is in danger/hurt, and they form enclosed communities which elide markers of difference between the children. These societies are likewise ironically utopian in structure. They form alternative family structures devoid of normative roles, they are largely androgynous or similarly ungendered, and they do not seem organized by

any identifiable class hierarchy.⁵⁴ Indeed, the revolting child collective films produce (in Tudor's terms) non-anthropomorphic monsters that, though human in form, are largely characterized as alien. Indeed, the lack of differentiation between subjects and therefore their void of individual characterization suggest a greater similarity to the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) than the possessed Regan of *The Exorcist* (1973).⁵⁵ And like zombies, the “emptiness” of the symbol of child-as-collective allows for a number of different symbolic investments over time. *Village of the Damned*, with its group of perfectly regimented fair-haired children, immediately recalls the Hitler Youth movement of the past and seems to speak simultaneously to a fear of the future—particularly Communist approaches to child-rearing.⁵⁶ Those same figures would later be able to fulfill a symbolic function to express anxiety about youth rebellion or even foreign insurgence (*Who Could Kill a Child?*) or conspiratorial urban fears over rural isolation (*Children of the Corn*).

Owing to their function as overdetermined symbolics, I argue that the child collective offers the queer spectator an inroad to imagining alternative forms of community while simultaneously “looking back” to childhood—the site of traumatic queer becoming. In this renarrativization of queer childhood, rather than erasure the queer spectator finds community in the shared struggle against patriarchal/paternal authority. Indeed, the *Village of the Damned* comes closest to what Victor Turner refers to as “communitas”: an alternative, nonhierarchical, and mutually beneficial union of individual bodies in a collective experience of harmony and common interests. Though ostensibly monsters, something is melancholy about them as well—as if they had arrived

twenty years early and found a world unable to accommodate them. This may be why the sequel to the film, *Children of the Damned*, finds the next iteration of the child invasion so sympathetic. Rounded up and used as government weapons, they seek sanctuary inside a church at the film's conclusion (inverting the sacred/profane binary of the other films). In this, *Children of the Damned* resembles the era's more progressive child collective films like *The Space Children* and *These Are the Damned*, in which the children are innocent victims of the military-industrial complex. Though Othered, the strong ties to one another and their sense of *communitas* offer something to desire in the child collective film. Even in the most perverse, homicidal, and cannibalistic revolting child collective, there is a perverse cohesion. Over the decimated bodies of the adults is a sense of unspoken kinship.

In her piece "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual," Butler defines kinship as "a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds... and emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few)."⁵⁷ Though such relations are understood as the purview of biological ties, there is no need to assume that this model is self-evidently natural or historically constant. Queerness, with its attendant renegotiation of familial relations, is seen as a threat to the existing heteronormative system, which maintains coherency and power through the devaluation, erasure, and exclusion of queer kinship. As Butler puts it, "[v]ariations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually-based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured as not only dangerous for the child,

but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility.”⁵⁸

Anthropologists and sociologists have, in recent years, denaturalized the notion of kinship from strictly biological ties and even mores from manufactured notions of matrimonial lineage. Indeed, as Kath Weston notes in *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians, Kinship*, the term “fictive kin” which has long been used to describe non-biological systems of kinship lost credibility as cultural critics have increasingly argued that all systems of kinship are in some sense fictional. As Weston claims, “genes and blood appear as symbols implicated in one culturally specific way of demarcating and calculating relationships.”⁵⁹ As the explicit desire to see a parent destroy his/her child fuels the normative reading of these films, they expose and deconstruct the supposed naturalness of genetic relationality. Blood relations, the films seem to suggest, are no reason not to take a hatchet to your child’s hands. The fools who allow their parental sympathies to override them are those who end up tied up to a piñata and poked with a pitchfork. The child collective resembles, but does not recapitulate, kinship systems of blood relationality. It is instead shared experience, desire, and importantly (recall Regan McNeil)—rage that draw together the individual children. As Albert Camus once said, “it is not so much identical conclusions that prove minds to be related as the contradictions that are common to them.”⁶⁰ The collectives are closely coordinated with that phrase often used to describe queer social networks—“families of choice.” Most dangerously, they question the very centrality and permanence of blood relations by infectiously

turning familial offspring away from their kin and towards a queerly alternative system of relations.

Afterthoughts: Fear of a Queer Playground

Parents need to be concerned when a child openly expresses a dissatisfaction [sic] with his or her sex, such as when a boy says, "I want to be a girl" or when a girl insists she is a boy. One extremely effeminate boy, when asked, "Do you want to be like your daddy when you grow up?" responded, "I don't want to grow up." Such statements should be taken as symptoms that something is very wrong. Although the boy may feel or even express the desire to grow up to be a woman, he is male and will grow up to be a man.

-- Dr. Richard Fitzgibbons and Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, "When Boys Won't Be Boys: Childhood Gender Identity [sic] Disorder"¹

If growing up means
It would be beneath my dignity to climb a tree,
I'll never grow up, never grow up, never grow up
Not me!
(Not I...)
Not me!

-- Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953)

I close this dissertation with a consideration of two disparate texts that will frame my concluding thoughts on queerness, development, childhood, and failure. On the surface, these texts could not be more different: one is a low-budget American independent thriller released in 2000, the other is an allegorical German drama based on a 1959 novel by Nobel Prize winner Gunter Grass. However, these films—*Chuck & Buck* (2000) and *The Tin Drum* (1979), respectively—offer ideologically polarized versions of rejecting the development narrative, and as such provide a useful frame for conceiving of a queer praxis that confronts the notion of heteronormative maturity.

Chuck & Buck tells the story of Buck O’Brien (Mike White) and Charlie “Chuck” Sitter (Chris Weitz), childhood friends and boyhood sexual partners who are reunited after Buck invites Charlie to his mother’s funeral. However, despite their shared past, the two are clearly defined as polar opposites: Charlie is now a heterosexually-defined family man and record executive, whereas Buck is an emotionally stunted gay man who subsists on a diet of gummi bears and Saturday morning cartoons. Buck attempts to renew their boyhood sexual affair, which they once referred to as “Chuck and Buck suck ‘n fuck,” and, when rebuffed, he stalks Charlie and writes a play about their love affair.

Screenwriting credit goes to lead actor Mike White, an out bisexual man—which is surprising given that the film traffics in the most socially regressive notions about queerness as a failure of maturity. Buck, as the film’s resident man-child, is a poster child for Peter Pan Syndrome—emotionally unstable, obsessed with infantile markers of

childhood frivolity, unable and unwilling to form emotional relationships with anyone but his coddling mother. The film links Buck's infantile contemptibility fairly explicitly with his being gay, as his queerness seems co-determinative with his inability to move past the transitional/phased queerness of his youth and enter into "proper" adult sexual and emotional relationships. This is hyperbolized when contrasted with Charlie ("Chuck" no more), who has attained all of the markers of maturity and normalcy. Charlie is haunted by Buck, who represents not just the invasion of queerness into a heterosexual milieu but a sort of return of the repressed, confronting Charlie with the polymorphous perversity of his youth.

In *The Tin Drum*, Oskar Matzerath (David Bennent) is a young child growing up during the Fascist regime of Nazi Germany. Reflecting upon the hypocrisy and heartlessness of adults around him, the three-year-old boy makes a decision one day to stop "growing up." Says Oskar, "[o]n that date, I thought about the world of grown ups, and about my own future. I decided to make a full stop. From now on I wouldn't grow at all. I'd always remain a three-year-old. The gnome." He remains physically a child until the last member of his family has died.

The 1978 German film *The Tin Drum* is not traditionally understood as a horror film, and yet it remains a curiosity to me because its child narrator contains almost all of the defining features of the revolting children discussed in this dissertation. The revolting child of *The Tin Drum* refuses to develop into a chronologically mature adult, and yet he harbors sexual knowledge incompatible with the body of a child. Largely silent throughout the film, he observes the hypocrisy of the adult world and excludes himself

from its machinations. After being rejected by his parents, he joins a group of traveling midget performers who accept him as part of their non-biological family. Owing to its allegorical, almost Magic Realist style, Oskar is possessed of the ability literally to arrest the forward movement of time. With a scream, he can shatter glass and halt adults in their tracks (recall the Midwich children, with their “eyes that paralyze”). Further, Oskar’s movement across the countryside happens “to the beat of another drum” as he continually disrupts the social order with the tantrum-like pounding of his eponymous tin drum. In one quite phenomenal scene, Oskar places himself beneath the stands at a Nazi rally and begins to beat his drum, discordant with the march performed by the Hitler Youth above him. Soon the marchers fall out of order, the music gives way to a waltz, and the marchers become dancers, grabbing partners of both sexes in a polymorphous display of revelry.

The Tin Drum is truly a remarkable film for its claims about the tyranny of the familial and heteronormative development, here refigured as literally Fascist in nature. Compare this to *Chuck & Buck*, which figures the refusal to “grow up” into heteronormative maturity as both an individual failure and a contagious threat to properly aligned heterosexuals. *The Tin Drum*, with its allegorical modality, provides a useful model for a queer politics that rejects the notion of normative growth as a Fascist principle based upon a spurious hegemonic link between maturity and heterosexuality.

In this conclusion, I want to return to the issue of praxis for a queer reassessment of the child symbolic and its function within the discursive field. As I have done throughout this dissertation, I want to stress the rhetorical link between children gone

wrong and queer adults. As such, I contend that the revolting child is both informed by and informs the public imaginary of queerness—as queerness has always been understood as a developmental problem, a crisis, or a trauma; as coming out has always been vilified as a taking over of the straight child or a taking from the family; as the queer child has always been dismissed as a triaged case—a child no more; as the queer woman or man has always been understood as not-yet-an-adult.

To a large degree, this dissertation has been “about” how the representation of nonnormative growth and the disruption of heterofamilial privilege provide inroads to a perverse and specifically queer pleasure. In the mise-en-scène of desire, the revolting child pleurably engages the queer spectator with animistic fantasies of empowered closetedness, abject rage, familial inclusion, and radical futurity. Just as *The Tin Drum* offers a fancifully impossible, but nonetheless pleasureable, reordering of the social order, so too do the films of revolting childhood provide a glimpse into a radical alterity.

I ask, in short, what the stakes are for a queer political body that is consistently infantilized by a heteronormative culture—one that degrades queerness as a failure to “grow up” (as defined by marriage and procreation) while it simultaneously bars access to those very markers of maturity? In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman rightly argues that the welfare of the child and the fight “for” the child has set the terms of political engagement, rendering any opposition unthinkable as there can be no “against” the child, against the future. As he says, “the fantasy subtending image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought.”² To even enter the conversation, queerness must also employ the rhetoric of child-saving

and familial primacy. What about gay children? What about gay families? The Boy Scouts, Gay/Straight Alliances, comprehensive sex education, gay adoption, gay marriage—each of these battles, while I do not wish to diminish their importance, must take place within and through the rhetoric of the child, the family, and the “developmental narrative”—the primacy of which remains unquestioned.

Recall Michel Foucault’s model of reverse discourse, which allows for the articulation of political resistance under the term by which queerness had been quantified, disciplined, and pathologized. As he says, “[t]he series of discourses that made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’ ... also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged often using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.”³

The time has come for queer politics to question the very logic of “development” and “maturity.” In “Transvaluing Immaturity: Reverse Discourses of Male Homosexuality in E.M. Forster’s Posthumously Published Fiction,” Stephen Da Silva argues that Forster connects queerness to the rhetorical terrain of youth, which is not stunted but continually growing and expanding, “inverting and transvaluing dominant developmental fictions of homosexuality.”⁴ In keeping with the spirit of Edelman’s polemic and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s discussion of “sideways growth,” I argue that queerness should not make a plea for developmental legitimacy as the terms of the “maturity” have been defined. Rather, it should take a note from the revolting child to

reject the very notion of normative growth and redefine development as varied, unending, and nonlinear movement.

This dissertation is very indebted to Edelman's polemic and finds the queer refusal to bow at the altar of the child as one of the essentially perverse pleasures of revolting child in cinema. Indeed, Edelman proposes a form of reverse discourse—taking the side of those “not fighting for the children,” as he says, and taking the place of culture's death drive. Ultimately, however, Edelman's tomorrowless void disappoints as the basis of any type of social change. All revulsion and no revolution, it holds the power to tear down but not to build. It also falls short in attempting to explain the pleasure of the revolting child, who troubles the family with its violent and unchildlike demeanor but also troubles the “family” as a representational body—unable to abject the part of itself that does violence to its coherency. The revolting child is destruction but also rebirth—not “no future” but a different future.

My dissatisfaction with Edelman brings me back to a paradigm mentioned at the start of this dissertation: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction between “paranoid” and “reparative” modes of reading. In brief, it is the division between viewing the text (or the world) as antagonistic and out to do us harm and celebrating the spectator (and for Sedgwick, the queer subject) as flexible, resourceful, and durable. Paranoid reading is a space of endangerment; reparative reading a place of healing. The cinema of revolting child finds pleasure in the paranoid—the sinthomosexual destruction of the present, the inconceivability of a radical alterity. But there is also a reparative pleasure—the renavigation of childhood trauma, the subaltern revolt against parental authority, the

refusal to grow up into normative sexuality. To find pleasure only in the destruction of the child and the elimination of the future—to see no future but annihilation--is to engage only in paranoia. To see instead the bad child as an avatar and queerness the promise of an alternative, restructured future is to settle into something like repair. Is claiming the space of the troublesome child to take up the banner of what Edelman deems the “death drive” of heteronormative culture, or does it offer something more constructive than annihilation? Even as *No Future* has helped form the structure of this dissertation, it has also been a troublesome presence, as Edelman’s vision seemed incompatible with the very features that have drawn me time and again to queer theory: creativity, playfulness, transformation. Most of all, it seems to lack perhaps the most enabling agent: hope.

Jose Esteban Muñoz offers that missing piece in his elegiac book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Instead of the forming the death drive or the annihilation of the future with no alternative in its stead, argues Muñoz, queerness is the emblematic standard-bearer of the future. It is what a progressive social politics should seek to achieve through troubling the present to reform the future. Says Muñoz, “The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see beyond the quagmire of the present. Here and now is a prison home. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”⁵

I look back to *The Tin Drum* and its revolting child Oskar whose shattering screams and chaotic drumming disrupt the social order and yet reform and transform the network of social relations as well. In transvaluing immaturity, in refusing to grow up, in rejecting abjection from the familial, in radically defining notions of kinship and family, the cinema of revolting childhood sets a scene of desire in which these possibilities can be realized.

A politics of queerness based in hope, in play, in a belief in tomorrow finds its most deserving avatar in the revolting child. The revolting child refuses to mature as it reveals immaturity to be powerful, dangerous, and pleasurable. Indeed, as Muñoz notes, queerness *is* immaturity—it is always unrealized, always unreached. Like childhood, its defining quality is its boundless potential for potential.

Introduction

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

² For a discussion of horror’s place within the catalogue of “body genres,” see Linda Williams’s “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” in Eds Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism* (5th Ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 701-716.

³ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 63.

⁴ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in Ed. Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195-220. As Wood notes, however, repression/oppression of children notable in its excess: “when we have worked our way through all the other liberation movements, we may discover that children have been the most oppressed section of the population” (200).

⁵ Wood, 200.

⁶ William Paul uses the term “revolting body” in his book *Laughing Screaming: Hollywood Comedy and Horror* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994) to refer to the body of Regan McNeil in *The Exorcist* as both a site of revulsion and revolt. I’m choosing to extend his usage to the entire body of unruly/unruled children that this work invokes.

⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal,” in Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 281.

⁸ See Neil Sinyard, *Children in the Movies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) and William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Is About You,” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). As a fairly overdetermined term, it is important to delineate Sedgwick’s use of the term “paranoid” from other perspectives in critical theory. For Sedgwick, the “paranoid” position describes a certain mindset or approach to discourse or textual analysis. It has “faith in exposure” (17), meaning that paranoid reading sees the act of revelation as a political end in and of itself. As she notes, “paranoia, for all its vaunted suspicion, acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known” (17). Given the queer theory approach of this dissertation, I want to differentiate Sedgwick’s terminology from its use as “queer paranoia,” which is generally used to discuss a frenzied homophobic reaction to gays and lesbians rather than an attempt to uncover said homophobia. (In cases where I wish to discuss this formation, I’ll likely use the term “gay/queer panic” instead). Lastly, Sedgwick’s paranoid reading is different that the historically-grounded usage of Richard A. Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which examined the conspiratorial logic of Cold War paranoia as it recapitulated a pervasive binary logic in American politics.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹¹ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 2.

¹² I draw here upon Jeffrey Sconce’s use of “paracinema” as a variety of cinematic texts that fall outside the traditional bounds of taste, value, or genre categories. For more, see Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing” the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style’, *Screen* 36.4: Winter 1995. 371-393. Others, such as Joan Hawkins, have argued that “paracinema” could also describe avant-garde texts that trouble the definition of “cinema.”

¹³ Henry Jenkins, “Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths,” *The Children’s Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1-2.

¹⁴ Phillipe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Random House, 1962), 72. Aries’s claims have received substantial criticism, most notably in the works of Geoffrey Elton and Richard J. Evans. Both locate

Aries's limited sample of paintings and moral education texts as insufficient for the broad historical claims that he makes, and also critique Aries for a scant discussion of economic and political factors which shape child representation.

¹⁵ James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child-Molesting* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), 15.

¹⁶ Ellen Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 46.

¹⁷ Qtd. Patricia Holland, *Picturing Childhood, Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004), 71.

¹⁸ Sabine Bussing, *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1987), xiv.

¹⁹ Ann Douglas, "The Dream of the Wise Child: Freud's 'Family Romance' Revisited in Contemporary Narratives of Horror." *Prospects* 9: 1984. 293-348. Douglas draws heavily upon the theories of Sandor Ferenczi, a contemporary (and sometimes adversary) of Sigmund Freud. For my work, his notion of the "wise child" and "the unwanted child" will be useful sources for later analysis.

²⁰ Douglas, 302.

²¹ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 184.

²² Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in Ed. Barry Keith Grant, *Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 143-163.147.

²³ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY, NY: Routledge, 1990), 206.

²⁴ See Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005).

²⁵ Carroll, 34.

²⁶ Barbara Creed, "Baby Bitches From Hell: Monstrous Little Women in Film," *Scary Women Symposium* (Berkeley: UCLA Film and Television Archive Research and Study Center, 1994), <<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/women/creed/creed1.html>>.

²⁷ Paul, 262.

²⁸ Paul, 269.

²⁹ Paul, 419.

³⁰ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 97.

³¹ Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 4.

³² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

³³ Benshoff, 12.

³⁴ See Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 183-196, and Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

³⁵ Doty, 3.

³⁶ Holland, 71.

³⁷ Richard Dyer, *Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³⁸ Jacqueline Rose. *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 60.

³⁹ Ohi's use of the word "disidentification" recalls Jose Estes Munoz's use of the term to describe a form of identification in which the subject does not "lose her/himself" in the chosen object, but rather identifies through commonalities and social inequities. Brett Farmer has used this notion in *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) to theorize gay male identifications with the female star in cinema. Likewise, I want to suggest, like Ohi, that queer spectators have a "murderous disidentification" with the revolting child, and that this identification is not an imposed infantilization, but rather an acknowledgement of commonalities.

⁴⁰ Paul Kelleher, "How To Do Things with Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the 'Child in Danger'," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 151-172. 152.

⁴¹ Stockton, 289.

⁴² Leo Bersani, *Homos*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 32.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume One* (NY: Vintage, 1990), 103.

⁴⁴ Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xvii.

⁴⁵ Michael Cobb, "Queer Theory and Its Children." *Criticism* 47.1 (Winter 2005): 119-130.

⁴⁶ See Lauren Berlant, *Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and "Live Sex Acts (Parental Advisory: Explicit Material)," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 57-80.

⁴⁷ Kelleher, 159.

⁴⁸ Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Edelman chooses to use the capitalized term "the Child" to refer to the concept of "reproductive futurism" and the avatar of its political power in order to distinguish it from actual children or children's bodies.

⁴⁹ Edelman, 2.

⁵⁰ Edelman, 29.

⁵¹ Edelman, 21.

⁵² Ellis Hanson, "Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*," In Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 110.

⁵³ Sanchez-Eppler, xxiv.

⁵⁴ Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

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- ⁵⁵ Edelman, 60.
- ⁵⁶ Sanchez-Eppler, xxvi.
- ⁵⁷ Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1998), 155.
- ⁵⁸ Rose, 113-114.
- ⁵⁹ Bussing, 2.
- ⁶⁰ Leslie Fielder, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (NY: Criterion Books, 1960), 65.
- ⁶¹ Jack Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp (aka Camp and the Gay Sensibility)," in Ed. Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 117-135. 121.
- ⁶² Farmer, 143.
- ⁶³ Doty, *Making Things*, 15.
- ⁶⁴ Jenkins, 15.
- ⁶⁵ Carol Clover. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 70-85.

Chapter 1: Sugar and Spice and Everything Vice: The Terrible Performativity of Childhood

- ¹ John Reid, *The Best Little Boy in the World* (New York: Putnam, 1973), 5.
- ² Reid, 3.
- ³ Reid, 2.
- ⁴ Patty McCormack, along with Nancy Kelly and a few other cast members, was imported directly from the stage version of *The Bad Seed*. Indeed, the film retained much of the play's proscenium style and staging, as well as what many critics at the time deemed a "theatrical" style of acting.
- ⁵ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, "Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 52-73.
- ⁶ For an exploration of the mise-en-scène of desire as a theoretical model, see Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia," *Contemporary Film Theory*, in Ed. Anthony Easthope (New York: Longman, 1993), 147-161.
- ⁷ Jack Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp (aka Camp and the Gay Sensibility)," *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, in Ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 121.
- ⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2.
- ⁹ Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 10 (1952): 303-313.
- ¹⁰ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- ¹¹ Richard Dyer, *Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2004), 59.
- ¹² Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp." *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 15.

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- ¹³ Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 15.
- ¹⁴ See Roy S. Simmons, *The Two Worlds of William March* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1984) and Ellen Showalter, "Introduction," *The Bad Seed* (NYC: Harper Collins, 1997), v-xiii.
- ¹⁵ William March, *The Bad Seed* (NYC: Harper Collins, 1997), 39.
- ¹⁶ Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (NY: First Ballantine Books, 1972), 82.
- ¹⁷ This is a telling change from March's novel: in the film version, Rhoda's father changes from being a businessman to being part of the military industrial complex, where we assume he takes part in adult warfare—a socially-sanctioned form of control and aggression for adult subjects.
- ¹⁸ Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* premieres only six years after *The Bad Seed*, and its sunglasses-adorned nymphette is employed as a major component of the advertising schema for the film.
- ¹⁹ Chuck Jackson, "Little, Violent, White: *The Bad Seed* and the Matter of Children." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28.2 (2000): 69.
- ²⁰ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 273.
- ²¹ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume One* (NY: Vintage, 1990).
- ²² Recall as well that Veda's deceit and nastiness results in acute suffering for her mother, Mildred. Like *The Bad Seed*, *Mildred Pierce* is partially driven by the question of whether Mildred will strike her daughter, which, in the latter, she does. *Mildred Pierce* also possesses pedaphobic moments, as when a character quips of Veda, "Personally, Veda's convinced me that alligators have the right idea. They eat their young."
- ²³ This is another significant change from March's novel: the original text is collectively focalized, often shifting into internal monologues to detail its characters' complicated and often repressed feeling about Rhoda. Of these, only LeRoy's soliloquies remain, resulting in a series of curiously artificial moments for that character. The only major character without internal monologues in the novel is Rhoda, who remains an object of rumination for the other characters rather than a dynamic subject herself.
- ²⁴ Paul, 274.
- ²⁵ Stephani Etheridge Woodson, "Mapping the Cultural Geography of Childhood: Or, Performing Monstrous Children," *Journal of American Culture* 22.4 (1999): 31-43.
- ²⁶ March, 26-7.
- ²⁷ Jacqueline Rose. *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction.*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).
- ²⁸ James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 79.
- ²⁹ As Lori Merrick notes, "cuteness" came to epitomize this aligned quality of dependency and innocence. "[In] its association with childhood," says Merrick, "cuteness always to some extent aestheticizes powerlessness [...] what the cute stage is, in part, is a

need for adult care" (187). In "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, in Ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (NY: New York University Press, 1996), 185-206.

³⁰ Jackson, 71-2.

³¹ Nostalgia, as Susan Stewart notes, has neither the recalcitrance of history or the presumed accuracy of memory. Rather it is "the desire to re-create something that has never existed before, to return to some place we've never been, and to reclaim a lost object we never possessed" (4). Indeed, nostalgia is laced with a mix of joyous memory and painful impossibility: Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician, coined the term "nostalgia" in 1688 when he combined the Greek word "nostos" (to return home) with "algia" (a painful condition)—an etymology which also echoes Freud's notion of the uncanny being both "home" and "not home."

³² Graham Greene (1937), as quoted by Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), 140. For a more extensive discussion of Shirley Temple, performance, and the fetishization of innocence, see Kristen Lee Hatch, "Playing Innocent: Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood, 1850-1939," Diss. University of California Los Angeles, 2006.

³³ Chuck Jackson, 72.

³⁴ For a thorough discussion of this film as it relates to childhood aggression and revolt, see Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Ed. Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195-220.

³⁵ Jerold Simmons, "The Production Code Under New Management: Geoffrey Shurlock, *The Bad Seed*, and *Tea and Sympathy*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22:1 (1994): 10.

³⁶ As quoted in Jerold Simmons, 11.

³⁷ Simmons, 11.

³⁸ Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10.

³⁹ Paul, 281.

⁴⁰ The other major test case for the Shurlock during this time was Vincente Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*, the story of a young gay man who "learns" to be heterosexual through an affair with a married woman. Tellingly, both films centered upon crises of normative development: one the adultlike child who seemed to have no need for parental intervention, one the childlike adult dangerously arrested in a phase of sexual dysphoria. The changes demanded in both films sought to eliminate all inroads to identification with the problematic children.

⁴¹ Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie 25* (Winter 1977/78). Reprinted in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 76.

⁴² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Is About You," *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 16.

⁴³ Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal," in Eds.

Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Sontag, 17.

⁴⁵ Alexander Doty, “‘My Beautiful Wickedness’: *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy,” *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 55

⁴⁶ Kathryn Bond Stockton, Email from author, July 13, 2007.

⁴⁷ Harry Benshoff, Personal correspondence, June 1, 2008.

⁴⁸ While I use both, my experience would say that it holds a more salient place within gay male communities, owing perhaps to gay male cultures centralization of camp as an interpretative (and some would say, survivalist) mode of engagement. This may also be owing to my own limitations in engagement, however.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Gazik, “The Queer Sort of Fandom for *Heavenly Creatures*: The Closeted Indigence, Lesbian Islands, and New Zealand National Cinema,” *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 47-62.

⁵⁰ “DVD Commentary,” *The Bad Seed*, DVD, Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, 1956.

⁵¹ “Review: *The Bad Seed*,” *The Hollywood Independent* (Oct 2007).

⁵² Showalter, xiii.

⁵³ Linda Mizejewski, Personal communication, March 23, 2005.

Chapter 2: Demons are a Girl’s Best Friend: Possession as Transgression

¹ John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary – A Non-Fiction Account, with Commentaries, of Three Days and Nights in the Sexual Underground* (NY, NY: Grove Press, Inc. 1977), 28-30, 300.

² Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 171.

³ Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 37.

⁴ Ellis Hanson, “Technology, Paranoia, and the Queer Voice,” *Screen* 34.2 (1993): 138.

⁵ Barbara Creed, “Baby Bitches from Hell: Monstrous Little Women in Film,” Paper delivered at the Scary Women Symposium, UCLA (January 1994), <<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/women/>>.

⁶ The use of Mercedes McCambridge’s voice for the possessed Regan came to light only after she sued Warner Brothers for not giving her screen credit.

⁷ Robin Leach, “For Once, the Devil Can’t Make Linda Blair Do It: This Year, She’s Going to Horse Around,” *People Weekly* 11 (July 1977): 38-43. 40.

⁸ “The Ghoul Next Door,” *Newsweek* 21 (January 1974): 97.

⁹ “Linda Gets a New Image,” *Seventeen* (July 1974): 84-5.

¹⁰ Shirley G. Streshinsky, “How Much Affection Should Two Girls Show?” *Seventeen* (July 1974): 78+.

¹¹ Michael O’Sullivan, “Have They Paid Too Much for Their Stardom?” *Rona Barrett’s Gossip* (Sept 1978): 12+.

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- ¹² “Linda-Exorcist—& Beyond Poster Kit,” Advertisement, *16 Magazine* (Dec 1974): 25.
- ¹³ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2007.
- ¹⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal,” *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 288-316. 278.
- ¹⁵ Michael Warner has a useful discussion of “in group purification” in his book *The Trouble with Normal* (NY: The Free Press, 1999).
- ¹⁶ Creed, “Baby Bitches,” 9.
- ¹⁷ For a few examples, see Nick Cull’s piece “The Exorcist,” *History Today* 50.5 (May 2000): 46-51, and Thomas S. Frentz and Thomas B. Farrell’s “Conversion of America’s Consciousness: The Rhetoric of The Exorcist,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61.1 (Feb 1975), 20-42, both of which exemplify this trend. Kendall R. Phillip’s *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* offers a universalizing perspective on the film’s reception as a loss of faith narrative in the post-Watergate era.
- ¹⁸ The issue of authorship in *The Exorcist* is a fascinating issue, and one that has been taken up in several texts (perhaps best by Mark Kermode’s BFI companion *The Exorcist*). As Kermode notes, Blatty—performing double duty as screenwriter and producer—was quite anxious about “alternative” interpretations, even going so far as to demand that a scene be reshot in order to make Blatty’s didactic meaning clear.
- ¹⁹ For a full discussion of the exhibition of *The Exorcist*, see Mark Kermode’s *The Exorcist: Second Edition*. London: BFI Publishing, 1998.
- ²⁰ Neil Sinyard, *Children in the Movies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 70.
- ²¹ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 297-8.
- ²² Creed, “Baby Bitches,” 7.
- ²³ Sabine Bussing, *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1987), xvii.
- ²⁴ Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, “The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing,” in Eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge. 1995), 13-56. 46.
- ²⁵ Evans and Gammon, 46.
- ²⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Preager, Inc. Publishers), 1966.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, in Ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (NY: New York University Press, 1996), 55-68.
- ²⁸ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY, NY: Routledge, 1990), 206.
- ²⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

³⁰ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in Ed. Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 35-65. 56.

³¹ Though I have said that delineating authorial intention is not my purpose in this paper, it is worth noting, briefly, that William Friedkin does have a certain predilection for queer themes in his work: this film comes three years after the self-loathing-but-generally-loved queer film *Boys in the Band* (1970) and seven years before the homophobic exploitation film *Cruising* (1980).

³² Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 15.

³³ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2. For more on the problem of horror and lesbian visibility, see Patricia White's *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

³⁴ As Judith Halberstam notes in "Looking Butch: A Rough Guide of Butches on Film," Mercedes McCambridge had cultivated a "predatory butch" (195) lesbian persona for herself in films such as *A Touch of Evil* (1958) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954). Tales of her swigging bourbon and chain smoking in order get the gravelly timbre of the demons voice, of course, only add to her bulldyke mystique. The "rough guide" serves as a chapter in Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

³⁵ We could recall *Carrie* as well here, which consistently links Carrie White to a pig within the film, culminating in drenching the young girl in pig's blood, an externalization of her monstrous menstruation.

³⁶ "Gay Exorcism, Full Version," YouTube.com, July 14, 2009, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz6qSfDvQQc>>.

³⁷ Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), 7.

³⁸ Ellis Hanson, "The Undead," in Ed. Diana Fuss, *insidel/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324-340.

³⁹ Stockton, 285.

⁴⁰ Consider, for instance, the scene in which Chris asks about the Ouija board that Regan has found in the basement closet (which, as Ellis Hanson puts it, "is generally not a good place to hide things from Dr. Freud" [125]):

CHRIS: Been playing with it?

REGAN: Yup.

CHRIS: You know how?

REGAN: I'll show you.

CHRIS: Wait a minute, you need two.

REGAN: No I don't. I do it all the time.

CHRIS: Oh yeah? Well, let's both play.

⁴¹ Ellis Hanson, "Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*," in Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 107-138. 122.

⁴² I had initially wanted to separate analysis of *The Exorcist* from that of DePalma's *Carrie* (1976), my reasoning being that one involved a possession and the other an inherent telekinetic power. However, given *The Exorcist*'s ambivalent alignment of the demon with Regan's own repressed rage, I find that they have more in common than I originally supposed.

Chapter 3: Raising Hell: Parental Rejection and the Possibility of Gay Adoption

¹ Kath Weston, *Families We Chose: Gays, Lesbians, Kinship* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 2.

² William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 265.

³ Phillip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (NY, Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart: 1942). A bestseller in the 1940s, *Generation of Vipers* blamed overly-affectionate and coddling "moms" for creating a nation of weak-willed men. This, of course, is much in keeping with cultural narratives of queerness and developmental crisis.

⁴ Paul, 265.

⁵ This masochistic element also holds true for *The Good Son*, in which mother Susan (Wendy Crewson) wades deep in maternal suffering as she chooses her nephew and adopted son (Elijah Wood) over her biological son (Macaulay Culkin), resulting in her biological son's death.

⁶ Paul, 265.

⁷ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in Ed. Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 197-223.

⁸ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), viii.

⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Edelman, 5.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess: Drafts and Notes 1887-1902* (New York: Basic Books, 1954), 256.

¹² Ann Douglas, "The Dream of the Wise Child: Freud's 'Family Romance' Revisited in Contemporary Narratives of Horror," *Prospects* 9 (1984): 293-348. 302.

¹³ Douglas, 302.

¹⁴ I use "I" in this context to stand in for the parental point of view in these films, and thus by extension, the spectator. I understand this formulation to be the dominant reading of the film, or the reading most likely directed by the text itself. As such, it has no bearing on how audiences actually read the text, particularly perverse or queer spectators.

¹⁵ This figuration has strong literary antecedents as well, no doubt owing to its folklore ties. Two notable examples: the changeling is found repeatedly in the work of William Shakespeare, most evident in the foundling Indian child that spurs a domestic battle between Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and second in the work of

Charles Dickens, where battered orphans find themselves returned to the bosom of rightful, true parents (*Oliver Twist*).

¹⁶ Two items: first is a general acknowledgement that Asian horror cinema abounds with forlorn spirits, particularly women and children. There are many explanations for this, many of them related to very culturally-specific folklore, literary, and artistic traditions in Asia, particularly Japan (see Jay McRoy's *Japanese Horror Cinema* for more). I include *The Grudge*, *The Ring*, *Dark Water*, and *The Eye* here despite their originations as Asian films—*Ju-On* (2002), *Ringu* (1998), *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (2002), and *Gin Gwai* (2002) respectively. Second is the fact that I will not be dealing with these films, as these rich texts require more space that I can devote to them and a cultural acumen that I (at this time, unfortunately) do not possess.

¹⁷ Though I refrain from dubbing a genre or a film categorically progressive or regressive (see the introduction for a fuller discussion), I offer that this narrative strain believes in progress, and is at least anti-nostalgic. Further, the forlorn child films claim that abuse was the problem, a far cry from the films in the latter half of this chapter that propose child abuse as the only sensible solution.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 113-4.

¹⁹ Penelope Gilliat, "Anguish Under the Skin," *New Yorker* (15 June 1968): 87-89.

²⁰ In a course I taught at Ohio State on Gothic literature, I found that pairing these two texts worked very well to talk about the Gothic and monstrous patriarchy and the juridical and medical discourses that upend these power relations.

²¹ In the alien invasion cycle of the 1950s, for instance, the first witness to invasion is often a child, and member of a lower socioeconomic class, or a woman. The police or military, therefore, dismiss their claims as over-emotional or uneducated exaggeration.

²² For a broader discussion of this particular film cycle, see my article "Deviled Eggs: Teratogenesis and the Gynecological Gothic in the Cinema of Monstrous Birth" in Ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik, *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in the Gothic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2010).

²³ Teratology, in contemporary medical discourse, refers to the study of biological defects and abnormal bodies. Teratogenesis specifically refers to the study of birth defects and the discovery of teratogens, or the etiologic causes (often of environmental origin) of birth defects. Interestingly, as --- notes, the Latin root "terata-" translates to both "monster" and "marvel," a fitting duality for the 19th century fascination with abnormal and unclassifiable bodies. Likewise, we may say that this ambivalence marks our fascination/repulsion with all "monsters"—literary, cinematic, and actual—due to their unclassifiable nature.

²⁴ For a fascinating study of both of these teratological subcategories, see Elizabeth Grosz's "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit," in Ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (NY: New York University Press, 1996), 55-68.

²⁵ This study gave way to the nineteenth-century freak-show, in which curiosities and medical abnormalities were put on display to reinforce the primacy of the normal, abled,

white body. In her introduction to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson aligns the function of the freak show with that of democracy and mercantilism—indeed, she makes fascinating links between the rise of industrialized standardization in production to an increased valorization of the standardized *body* through eugenic discourse. Freak shows, medical journals, teratology, and sensational media all asked readers and spectators to compare themselves to the defined abnormalities in order to confirm their normative gender, racial, and bodily identities, while at the same time offering group membership through what Thomson calls “a public ritual that bond[s] a sundering polity together in the collective act of looking” (4).

²⁶ One of the most fascinating examples is the case of Puritan religious leader Ann Hutchinson, whose Antinomian teachings brought about the ire of religious officials. After her heresy trial in 1637, Hutchinson was accused of causing the “monstrous pregnancy” of one of her followers, Mary Dyer. The fetus was exhumed and displayed publicly for the parishioners to witness of the horror of Hutchinson’s dangerous theology and the results of her teratogenic miscreance.

²⁷ Published in 1866, Ernst Haeckel’s theory of recapitulation (commonly restated as “ontology recapitulates phylogeny”) holds that the evolutionary history of the entire human species (phylogeny) can be witnessed in the ontological growth of a single human being. Though debunked in modern times, this body of theory has continuing impact on eugenics and theories of racial superiority, particularly when racial dominance is cast in terms of child/adult developmental stages.

²⁸ See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond: Expanded and Revised Edition* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2003) and Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

²⁹ This includes to sequels, both by director Larry Cohen: *It Lives Again* (1978), and *It’s Alive III: Island of the Alive* (1987). In the first sequel, Frank returns as an impassioned advocate for the teratogenic infants, pleading for their asylum in open court and traveling around the country to educate expectant parents.

³⁰ See Patricia Ehrens, “Stepfather: Father as Monster in Contemporary Horror Film,” and Vivian Sobchack, “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” in Ed. Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

³¹ Based on the novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) by John Wyndham.

³² Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³³ Wheeler Dixon, “The Child as Demon in Films since 1961,” *Films in Review* 37.2 (February 1986): 81-2.

³⁴ Edelman, 21.

³⁵ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in Ed. Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195-220. 198.

³⁶ One of the items that I came across when researching fan magazines for Linda Blair was a full two-page advertising spread for this film, which featured Jonathan Scott-Taylor as the adolescent Damien. I find this inclusion telling, as Taylor's image for this film exists somewhere between pretty boy pin-up and Reagan McNeil-level avatar of adolescent queerly-tinged anger. Its inclusion in an issue which features "Sexy Linda Blair & Exorcist pics" should be no surprise given Blair's utility as an equally pleasurable manifestation of transgressive rage.

³⁷ The end of the film, it is intimated, brings about the Biblical rapture with Damien's defeat. This, fans note, poses a continuity problem for the sequel *Omen IV: The Awakening*, and in an interestingly queer reception practice, fans have located this omission as a rationale to read the conclusion of *Omen III* as spiritual illusion and not the actual Rapture.

³⁸ Wood, 211.

³⁹ Dixon, 83.

⁴⁰ D.A. Miller, "Anal Rope," in Ed. Diana Fuss, *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (NY: Routledge, 1991), 119-142.125.

Chapter 4: It Takes a Child to Raze a Village: Demonizing Youth Rebellion

¹ Richard Neville, *The Politics of Play: Exploring the International Underground* (London: Cape Publishers, 1970), 278.

² George Hecht, "1950-1960: The Decade of the Child," *Parents' Magazine* (January 1950), 18.

³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

⁴ Edelman, 3.

⁵ Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Ed. Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195-220. 200.

⁶ As there are two films in this chapter with the same title, I will continue to use the release year when referring to these films as a means of differentiation.

⁷ Films implicated in the subgenre include *The Space Children* (1958), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), *The Innocents* (1961), *These Are the Damned* (1963), *Children of the Damned* (1963), *Don't Deliver Us from Evil [Mais ne nous délivrez pas du mal]* (1970), *The Other* (1970), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *The Fury* (1978), *It Lives Again* (1978), *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive* (1987), *The Brood* (1979), *The Children* (1980), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* (1993), *Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest* (1995), *Children of the Corn 666: Isaacs's Return* (1999), *Children of the Corn IV: The Gathering* (1996), *Children of the Corn V: Fields of Terror* (1998), *Children of the Corn: Revelation* (2001), *Beware: Children at Play* (1989), *Cuckoos at Bangpleng [Kawow tee Bangpleng]* (1994), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Sister My Sister* (1994), *Fun* (1994), *Village of the Damned* (1995), *Battle Royale*

[*Batoru rowaiaru*] (2000), *Battle Royale II* [*Batoru rowaiaru II: Chinkonka*] (2003), *Stacy* (2001), *The Plague* (2006), *The Children* (2008), and *Child's Game* (2010).

⁸ *The Children* is not alone in its inclusion of revolting children within the "Homo Horror Guide." Other alums from this dissertation include *Apt Pupil*, *The Baby*, *Bride of Chucky*, *The Exorcist*, *Ginger Snaps*, *May*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *The Unborn*.

⁹ The musical is still in rep at several theatres around the country. More information is available at <http://www.thechildrenthewebsite.com>.

¹⁰ "The Children: The Musical," *The Children*, DVD Special Features, 2001.

¹¹ Buzz, "The Children (of Ravensblack) [review]," *CampBlood*. 04 February, 2010. <<http://campblood.org/Reviews/Review%20-%20The%20Children.htm>>.

¹² Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 262.

¹³ James Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1973), 143.

¹⁵ Foucault, 143.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *The Foucault Reader* (NY: Random House, 1984), 45.

¹⁷ Eric Ziolkowski, *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001).

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ Bersani. 76.

²⁰ Gilbert, 187.

²¹ Qtd. in Gilbert, 72.

²² Based on the novel *Child's Game* [*El Juego de los Niños*] (1970) by Juan José Plans.

²³ See the DVD extras on *The Children* DVD and the official website for the musical adaptation at <<http://www.thechildrenthewebsite.com>>.

²⁴ Based on a Stephen King short story of the same name from his book *Night Shift* (1979). Interestingly, it has been suggested that King's short story is concise reworking of Juan Jose Plans' novel *The Children's Game*, which was adapted as *Who Can Kill a Child?*

²⁵ Lloyd Kaufman, "Introduction," DVD, *Beware: Children at Play*, directed by Max Kalmanowicz, 1980.

²⁶ Patricia Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004), 64.

²⁷ Holland, 80.

²⁸ Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Comedia, 1988), 18.

²⁹ Diederik Janssen, "Re-Queering Queer Youth Development: A Post-Developmental Approach to Childhood and Pedagogy," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 3 (2008): 84.

³⁰ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 13.

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- ³¹ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in Ed. Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 62.
- ³² Neville, 278.
- ³³ Holland, 15.
- ³⁴ Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia," in Ed. Anthony Easthope, *Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Longman, 1993), 148.
- ³⁵ Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13:1 (2002), 14-44. 18.
- ³⁶ Butler, "Kinship," 20.
- ³⁷ Edelman, 3.
- ³⁸ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 113.
- ³⁹ Tudor, 67.
- ⁴⁰ Amit Rai, "The Future is a Monster," *Camera Obscura* 21 (2006): 59-51. 59.
- ⁴¹ Ellis Hanson, "The Undead," in Ed. Diana Fuss, *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324-340.
- ⁴² Carson McCullers, *A Member of the Wedding* (NY: First Mariner Books, 1946), 1.
- ⁴³ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21.
- ⁴⁴ McCullers, 23-4.
- ⁴⁵ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in Ed. Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15-34. 18.
- ⁴⁶ 81st Congress 2nd Session, *Cong. Rec.* 96.4 (29 March-24 April 1950): 4527-4528, <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/gays-in-govt.html>>.
- ⁴⁷ Holland, 109.
- ⁴⁸ Carol Clover, "The Eye of Horror," in Ed. Linda Williams, *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 184-230.
- ⁴⁹ Interestingly, it is suggested in a number of the mid-reading sequences that the children can read the adults' hateful, and even murderous, impulses towards them. The adults register shock at this suggestion, which is either an anxious rejection, or a sign that the children have access to their unconscious motivations—essentially that they know the adults better than they know themselves.
- ⁵⁰ Joel Best, *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child-Victims* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 116.
- ⁵¹ Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 258.
- ⁵² Ed Vitagliano, "Targeting Children: How the Homosexual Movement Uses School as Instruments of Change," *American Family Association* website (12 January 2010), <http://www.afa.net/homosexual_agenda/childrenb.asp>. [article removed].
- ⁵³ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Howard Stein, "Child Abuse and the Unconscious in American Popular Culture," in Ed. Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 185.

⁵⁴ A notable exception is *Children of the Corn*, which uses a child leader due to the film's deployment of the "cult" anxiety, though it should be noted that his subjects eventually overthrow the cult leader when he no longer supports their collective wishes.

⁵⁵ Tudor, 115.

⁵⁶ Margaret Mead's "Child-Training Ideals in a Postrevolutionary Context: Soviet Russia." *Childhood in Contemporary Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) delineates "good" American and "bad" Soviet child-rearing practices, the latter of which raises overcivilized adult-like children.

⁵⁷ Butler, "Kinship," 15.

⁵⁸ Butler, "Kinship," 16.

⁵⁹ Kath Weston, *Families We Chose: Gays, Lesbians, Kinship* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 105.

⁶⁰ As qtd. In Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 5.

Afterthoughts: Fear of a Queer Playground

¹ Richard Fitzgibbons and Joseph Nicolosi, "When Boys Won't Be Boys: Childhood Gender Identity Disorder," *Catholic Education Resource Center*. Reprinted from *Lay Witness* (June, 2001). Jan 30, 2010.

<<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/homosexuality/ho0045.html>>.

² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume One* (NY: Vintage, 1990), 101.

⁴ Stephen Da Silva, "Transvaluing Immaturity: Reverse Discourses of Male Homosexuality in E.M. Forster's Posthumously Published Fiction," *Criticism* 40.2 (Spring 1998): 270.

⁵⁵ Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Film Appendix

666: The Child. Dir. Jake Perez. The Asylum, 2006.

A news reporter adopts a little boy who was the lone survivor of a crash. She soon realizes, though, that this boy is evil.

Alucarda. Dir. Juan Lopez Montezuma. Films 75. 1978.

A young woman goes to live at a convent and unleashes an evil force.

Angel Heart. Dir. Alan Parker. Carolco International N.V., 1987.

A private investigator is hired to track down a singer.

The Astronaut's Wife. Dir. Rand Ravich. New Line Cinema, 1999.

Two astronauts are involved in a mysterious incident while in their shuttle. They come home safely, but they have changed.

Audrey Rose. Dir. Robert Wise. Sterobcar Productions, 1977.

A young couple meets a man who tries to convince them that their daughter possesses the spirit of his daughter, reincarnated.

The Awakening. Dir. Mike Newell. EMI Films, 1980.

An archaeologist tries to save his daughter, and the world, after she becomes possessed by the spirit of an Egyptian queen.

The Bad Seed. Dir. Mervyn Leroy. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1956.

When a boy in her daughter's class dies in a drowning incident, a mother fears her daughter may have been involved.

The Bad Seed. Paul Wendkos. Hajeno Productions, 1985.

In the remake of the 1956 film, a mother confronts the fact that her daughter is a vicious killer.

Basket Case. Dir. Frank Henenlotter. Basket Case Productions, 1981.

A man and his deformed brothers seek out revenge against the doctor that separated their formerly-conjoined bodies.

Basket Case 2. Dir. Frank Henenlotter. 1990.

Formerly conjoined twins take refuge with the aunt, who houses freaks in her home.

Basket Case 3: The Progeny. Dir. Frank Henenlotter. Shapiro, Glickenhau Home Video, 1992.

Belial unleashes his fury on a group of cops that captured his newly born, deformity-covered child.

Battle Royale. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku. Battle Royale Production Committee, 2000.
A high school class is put on an island and forced to fight each other to the death.

Battle Royale II: Requiem. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku. Battle Royale Production Committee, 2003.
A new group of high school students are forced to do battle, this time to kill the survivors of the last Battle Royale.

Ben. Dir. Phil Karlson. Bing Crosby Productions, 1972.
A boy befriends a rat, the leader of a group of killer rats.

Beware: Children at Play. Dir. Mick Cribben. Troma Entertainment, 1989.
An evil teenager steals children so that he can train them to be killers.

Bless the Child. Dir. Chuck Russell. BTC Productions KG, 2001.
A woman fights for control over her sister's daughter. The daughter was a victim of an occult ritual that gave her strange powers.

Blessed. Dir. Simon Fellows. Syndicate Films, 2004.
A woman is fertilized with Satan's DNA after a trip to the fertility clinic.

Blood of Dracula. Dir. Herbert L. Strock. American International Pictures, 1957.
A science teacher uses hypnosis to manipulate an unwitting girl and make her commit horrible crimes.

Blood on Satan's Claw. Dir. Piers Haggard. Tigon British Film Productions, 1971.
A Satanic beast invades a town, causing the children in the village to become evil.

Bloody Birthday. Dir. Ed Hunt. Judica Productions, 1981.
Three children have become vicious killers because they were born when the moon was blocking Saturn.

The Boy with Green Hair. Dir. Joseph Losey. RKO Radio Pictures, 1945.
When a war orphan realizes his parents are dead, his hair turns green, which causes the other people in his town to shun him.

The Boys From Brazil. Dir. Franklin J. Schaffner. Incorporated Television Company, 1978.
A Nazi in exile tries to revive Hitler and the Third Reich through a group of young boys.

The Brood. Dir. David Cronenberg. Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1978.

Mutant children murder people while a man investigates the extreme methods a psychiatrist uses on his wife.

Brotherhood of the Wolf. Dir. Christophe Gans. Canal+, 2001.
A mysterious monster kills off villagers in 18th century France.

Bully. Dir. Larry Clark. Studio Canal, 2001.
A group of teenagers plot to murder a kid that has bullied them.

Cannibal Holocaust. Dir. Ruggero Deodato. F.D. Cinematografica, 1980.
A documentary crew visits a cannibal tribe in South America and suffer the fatal consequences.

Carrie. Dir. Brian DePalma. Redbank Films, 1976.
A young girl with telekinetic powers unleashes her wrath on her schoolmates after they humiliate her at prom.

Cathy's Curse. Dir. Eddy Matalon. Les Productions Agora, 1977.
A young woman, possessed by the spirit of her dead aunt, starts killing her family members.

Celia. Dir. Ann Turner. Seon Film Productions, 1989.
A young girl descends into madness and has fantasies about hideous monsters.

The Changeling. Dir. Peter Medak. Chessman Park Productions, 1980.
A composer who just lost his wife and daughter in a car accident, stays in a home haunted by a child.

Chi Sei?. Dir. Ovidio G. Assonitis, Robert Barrett. A Erre Cinematografica, 1974.
A pregnant woman becomes possessed by the devil.

The Child. Dir. Robert Voskanian. Panorama Films, 1977.
A housekeeper learns that the young girl who lives there possesses supernatural powers that she uses for nefarious means.

Child's Play. Dir. Tom Holland. United Artists, 1988.
A child receives the worst gift ever, a doll that kills.

The Children. Max Kalmanowicz. Albright Films, Inc., 1980.
When their children become infected by a gas that turns them into killers, their parents must make tough choices.

Children of the Corn. Dir. Fritz Kiersch. Angeles Entertainment Group, 1984.
The children in a town, under the influence of a child preacher, attack the adults.

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice. Dir. David Price. Corn Cob Productions, 1992.

The children from the first film are moved to a nearby town, and are visited by a curious man.

Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest. Dir. James D.R. Hickox. Park Avenue Productions, 1995.

Two children from Gatlin are taken in by foster parents in Chicago, and terror falls upon the city.

Children of the Damned. Dir. Anton M. Leader, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios, 1964.

Six incredibly smart children are discovered at various points around the world. International tensions rise.

The Children's Hour. Dir. William Wyler. The Mirsch Corporation, 1961.

A spiteful student at a private school for girls sabotages the headmistresses by accusing them of being lesbian lovers.

Communion. Dir. Alfred Sole. Harristown Funding, 1976.

When a girl dies after her first communion, her older sister is suspected of committing the crime.

Crush. Dir. Alison Maclean. Hibiscus Films, 1992.

A man becomes involved with a novelist's teenage daughter, which leads to trouble.

The Curse of the Cat People. Dirs. Robert Wise, Gunther von Fritsch. RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.

A lonely girl with a very active imagination meets a new friend when the ghost of her father's first wife visits her.

Daddy's Girl. Dir. Martin Kitrosser. The Image Organization, 1996.

A girl, obsessed with her father, viciously attacks those who come near him.

Damien: Omen II. Dir. Don Taylor. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1978.

Damien, now coming of age, is led towards his destiny by a Satan worshipper.

Dark Water. Dir. Walter Salles. Touchstone Pictures, 2005.

A woman wins a lengthy custody battle, but cannot enjoy her time with her daughter because the two of them are haunted by a ghost.

Dawn of the Dead. Dir. Zack Snyder. Strike Entertainment, 2004.

A group of people seek refuge in a mall during the zombie apocalypse.

Dead Alive. Dir. Peter Jackson. WingNut Films, 1992.

An infected rat monkey bites a woman and turns her into the first in a string of zombies.

Deadly Friend. Dir. Wes Craven. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1986.

A teenage boy tries to save his crush, who was pushed down the stairs by her father, by implanting his robot friend's brain into her skull.

Demon Seed. Dir. Donald Cammell. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1977.

A super-intelligent computer starts to become interested in a scientist's wife.

Demon Witch Child. Dir. Amando De Ossorio. Isaac Hernande Poncela, 1975.

A politician throws a witch in jail, only to have the witch possess his daughter years later.

Devil Times Five. Dir. Sean Macgregor. Barrister Productions, 1974.

Murderous children escape from the psychiatrists holding them and attack a group of adults foolish enough to take them in.

The Devil's Backbone. Dir. Guillermo Del Toro. El Deseo S.A, 2001.

During the Spanish Civil War, a young orphan encounters a ghost at a boarding school.

Dolly Dearest. Dir. Maria Lease. Channeler Enterprises, 1991.

A family moves to Mexico to make toys, but their toys turn on them.

Don't Deliver Us from Evil. Dir. Joel Seria. Societe Generale de Production Amicus Productions, 1971.

An investigator searches for answers in four unsolved cases, including one involving a little girl who has taken to witchcraft.

Don't Go To Sleep. Dir. Richard Lang. Aaron Spelling Productions, 1982.

A girl is haunted by the ghost of her younger sister.

Don't Look Now. Dir. Nicolas Roeg. Casey Productions. 1973.

An American couple moves to Italy after the death of their daughter. But things turn bad when the husband starts seeing visions of their dead daughter.

Escape to Witch Mountain. Dir John Hough. Walt Disney Pictures, 1975.

Two orphans possess magical powers and are pursued by an evil millionaire.

The Exorcist. Dir. William Friedkin. Hoya Productions, 1973.

A mother brings in a priest in an effort to save her daughter, who has been possessed by a demon.

Exorcist II: The Heretic. Dir. John Boorman. Warner Bros. Pictures. 1977.

Though she was exorcised years earlier, a girl learns that the demon may still be inside of her.

Firestarter. Dir. Mark L Lester. Dino De Lorentiis Company, 1984.

Two telekinetic people give birth to a daughter who can control fire with her mind.

Flesh For Frankenstein. Dir. Paul Morrissey, Antonio Margheriti. Compagnia Cinematografico Champion, 1973.

Baron Frankenstein tries to build a perfect man and woman, but can't breed them when he accidentally uses the head of a gay man.

Full Circle. Dir. Richard Loncraine. Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1977.

A housewife is haunted by the ghost of her recently deceased daughter.

Fun. Rafal Zielinski. Greycat Films/neo Modern Entertainment, 1994.

Shortly after meeting each other, two girls kill an old woman together for fun.

The Fury. Dir. Brian De Palma. Frank Yablans Presentations, 1978.

The government tries to exploit a young boy's psychic abilities, but his father comes to his rescue.

The Gamma People. Dir. John Gilling. Warwick Film Productions, 1956.

A reporter discovers that a dictator uses gamma radiation to turn children into mutated killers.

Ginger Snaps. Dir. John Fawcett. Copperheart Entertainment, 2000.

The bond between two sisters is threatened when one becomes a teenage werewolf.

Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning. Dir. Grant Harvey. 49 Films, 2004.

Two orphaned twins take refuge with settlers, but are attacked by werewolf-like monsters.

The Godsend. Dir. Gabrielle Beaumont. Cannon Films 1980.

A family takes in an orphan as their own, but, as their children die prematurely, they begin to wonder if they've made the right choice.

Godsend. Dir. Nick Hamm. Lions Gate Films, 2004.

A couple clones their deceased son, but the clone does not turn out right.

The Good Son. Dir. Joseph Ruben. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1993.

A young boy is put in danger when his cousin starts acting increasingly sinister.

The Grudge. Dir Takashi Shimizu. Senator International, 2004.

A family of ghosts haunts a house after they are murdered in a crime of passion.

The Grudge 2. Dir. Takashi Shimizu. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2006.
A young woman tries to fight off an evil force that fills its victims with rage.

Halloween. Dir. John Carpenter. Compass International Pictures, 1978.
A babysitter and her friends are attacked by a maniac that has escaped from an asylum.

Hands of the Ripper. Dir. Peter Sasdy. Hammer Film Productions, 1971.
Jack the Ripper's teenage daughter is taken in by a psychiatrist who thinks he can cure her of her murderous desires.

Hard Candy. Dir. David Slade. Vulcan Productions, 2005.
A 14-year-old girl gets revenge on a man who took advantage of her.

Heavenly Creatures. Dir. Peter Jackson. Fontana Productions, 1994.
Two girls meet, start a lesbian relationship, and turn to murder.

A High Wind in Jamaica. Dir. Alexander Mackendrick. 20th Century Fox, 1965.
British parents living in Colonial Jamaica send their children back to Britain, afraid of the way that the "savage" country is affecting them. On the way home, though, the children are seized by pirates.

I Don't Want to be Born. Dir. Peter Sasdy. Unicapital, 1975.
A woman mistreats a dwarf, only to have him possess her child years later.

I Was a Teenage Frankenstein. Dir. Herbert L. Strock, Santa Rosa Productions, 1957.
After a deadly crash, a university professor steals body parts and uses them to create a disfigured monster that becomes murderous.

I Was a Teenage Werewolf. Dir. Gene Fowler Jr. Sunset Productions, 1957.
A teenager seeks out a doctor to help him control his anger. The doctor, however, subjects the boy to tests and makes him regress to an animal state.

Identity. Dir. James Mangold. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2003.
People are stranded in a hotel, helpless against the person killing them.

The Illustrated Man. Dir. Jack Smight. SKM, 1969.
A man searches for the woman who covered him in tattoos. Each tattoo tells a story about the future, and this anthology film focuses on three of those stories.

The Innocents. Dir. Jack Clayton. Achilles, 1961.
A governess in Victorian England tries to help two children free their souls from the ghosts that haunt them.

Inseminoid. Norman J. Warren. Jupiter Film Productions, 1981.

A woman on a spaceship, after being impregnated by an alien, becomes homicidal.

Interview with a Vampire. Dir. Neil Jordan. Geffen Pictures, 1994.

An 18th century plantation owner is turned into a vampire and then turns a little girl into one as well.

It Lives Again!. Dir. Larry Cohen. Larco Productions, 1978.

The man who fathered the first monster baby warns another couple that they will face the same fate.

It's Alive. Dir. Larry Cohen. Larco Productions, 1974.

A young couple are devastated when their child is born a crazed monster.

It's Alive III: Island of the Alive. Dir. Larry Cohen. Larco Productions, 1987.

A man tries to save the mutant babies, who have been exiled onto an island.

"It's a Good Life," *The Twilight Zone*. Dir. James Sheldon, 1961.

A six-year-old controls an entire town, keeping them in constant fear of his amazing mental powers.

Jennifer. Dir. Brice Mack. American International Pictures, 1978.

A girl who can control snakes with her mind uses her power to attack those at her school who have ridiculed her.

Joshua. Dir. George Ratliff. ATO Pictures, 2007.

When his mother gives birth to a baby girl, a 9-year-old boy turns evil.

Ju-On. Dir. Takashi Shimizu. Toei Video Company, 2000.

A family of ghosts haunts a house after they are murdered in a crime of passion.

Julie Darling. Dir. Paul Nicholas, Maurice Smith. Hansa Productions, 1983.

A teenage girl, obsessed with her father, attacks her stepmother and stepbrother when they enter her life.

Kill, Baby... Kill! Dir. Mario Bava. FUL Films. 1966.

An inspector investigates a woman's mysterious death, only to become a victim of the ghost of Melissa, the little girl responsible for the murder.

Kiss Daddy Goodbye. Dir. Patrick Regan. Pendragon Film, 1981.

Two psychic children attack the biker gang that killed their father.

Kiss of the Tarantula. Dir. Chris Munger. Cinema-Vu, 1976.

A teenage girl uses her pet tarantulas as weapons against those classmates who have tormented her.

Let's Kill Uncle. Dir. William Castle. William Castle Productions, 1966.

A 12-year-old boy defends himself against his uncle, who tries to kill the boy before he can collect his inheritance.

The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane. Dir. Nicolas Gessner. Braun Entertainment Group, 1976.

When her father leaves their secluded house, a girl must protect their home from curious visitors.

Lolita. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1962.

A man marries a woman so that he might get closer to his true love, the woman's 14-year-old daughter.

Lord of the Flies. Dir. Peter Brook. Two Arts, Ltd., 1963.

A group of boys crash onto an island and become more vicious and savage each day.

The Lost Boys. Dir. Joel Schumacher. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987.

A teenage boy and his little brother fight off a crew of hip, Californian vampires.

Macabro. Dir. Lamberto Bava. A.M.A. Film, 1980.

A woman is released from a mental asylum a year after her lover died in a car accident. She runs into problems with a suspicious blind man and her murderous daughter.

The Manitou. Dir. William Girdler. Mid-America Pictures, 1978.

A woman believes she has a tumorous growth on her neck, but the growth turns out to be the fetus of a centuries-old American Indian.

May. Dir. Lucky McKee. 2 Loop Films, 2002.

A young woman seeks to build the perfect lover from the parts of men she meets.

Meet Me in St. Louis. Dir. Arthur Freed. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944.

The head of a wealthy family must decide the fate of his four daughters and determine whether or not they will leave St. Louis and miss the World's Fair.

Memento Mori. Dir. Tae Yong Kim, Kyu Dong Min. 1999.

A girl discovers a diary that induces frightening hallucinations.

Mikey. Dir. Dennis Dimster. 1992.

A boy is shuffled from home to home after each of his foster families falls victim to his destructive nature.

Mildred Pierce. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945.

A divorcee is swindled by her new husband who is in league with her eldest daughter.

Milo. Dir. Pascal Franchot. MDF Productions III, 1998.

A boy's kills a classmate and disappears. Years later, the boy's ghost reappears.

Monster on the Campus. Dir. Jack Arnold. Universal International Pictures, 1958.

The blood from a prehistoric fish turns a college professor into a beast that rampages through the campus.

The Nanny. Dir. Seth Holt. Associated British, 1965.

A nanny watches over a boy who drowned his little sister. When the boy's mother is poisoned, he is suspected, but he blames the nanny.

Night Hair Child. Dir. James Kelly and Andrea Bianchi. Cemo Film, 1972.

A young bride moves in with her new husband and becomes suspicious and fearful of her stepson.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George Romero. Image Ten, 1968.

A group of people tries to survive after reanimated corpses start to walk the earth in search of human flesh.

The Other. Dir. Robert Mulligan. Benchmark, 1972.

Twin brothers terrorize their family, though one of the brothers is not what he seems to be.

The Omen. Dir. Richard Donner. Twentieth Century Fox Productions, 1976.

A man learns that his adopted son is the Biblical Antichrist.

The Omen. Dir. John Moore. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2006.

A remake of the 1976 film--a man must face the reality that his son is the Antichrist.

Omen III: The Final Conflict. Dir. Graham Baker. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1981.

A grown up Damien seeks to destroy the newborn Christ child.

The Paper Boy. Dir. Douglas Jackson. Allegro Films, 1994.

A mentally unstable boy tries to adopt the family next door as his own.

Pet Semetary. Dir. Mary Lambert. Laurel Productions, 1989.

A family moves into a new town. After their son dies, the father takes him to a cemetery where the townspeople believe the dead are resurrected.

Pet Semetary II. Dir. Mary Lambert. Paramount Pictures, 1992.

Once again, new inhabitants in the town fall victim to the supernatural forces in the cemetery.

Phenomena. Dir. Dario Argento. DACFILM Rome, 1985.

A young girl uses her psychic connection to insects to solve a murder.

The Pit. Dir. Lew Lehman. Amulet Pictures, 1981.

A boy terrorizes his, communicates with his teddy bear, and feeds people to trolls.

The Plague. Dir. Hal Masonberg. Armada Pictures, 2006.

All children fall into a coma one day, and ten years later they wake up and are violent and zombie-like.

Poltergeist. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1982.

A family tries to fight off the ghosts that have invaded their house.

Poison for the Fairies. Dir. Carlos Enrique Taboada. Institue Mexicana Cinematografia, 1984.

Two little girls form a friendship and drive each other to commit murderous acts.

Poison Ivy. Dir. Katt Shea. New Line Cinema, 1992.

A scheming teenager forces her way into another girl's family.

Progeny. Dir. Brian Yuzna. Progeny Films Inc., 1998.

Aliens impregnate an unsuspecting woman.

Pyrokenesis. Dir. Shushuke Kaneko. Toho Company, 2000.

A woman uses her control over fires to track down a murderous boy.

Relative Fear. Dir. George Mihalka. Allegro Films, 1994.

A mystery arises when a string of people die after being around a small boy.

Return from Witch Mountain. Dir. John Hough. Walt Disney Pictures, 1978.

A scientist looks to manipulate two twins with psychic powers.

The Ring. Dir. Gore Verbinski. Dreamworks SKG, 2002.

In this remake, American people fall victim to the spirits that haunt a VHS tape.

The Ring 2. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Dreamworks SKG, 2005.

The videotape was destroyed, but Rachel finds out that the danger is not over.

Ringu. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Omega Project, 1998.

People fall victim to the evil spirits that possess a VHS tape.

Ringu 2. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Company, 1999.

The victim from the first film gains the psychic powers that his attacker possessed.

Rosemary's Baby. Dir. Roman Polanski. William Castle Productions, 1968.

A young couple is expecting a child, though the mother fears that she is carrying the spawn of Satan in her womb.

Ruby. Dir. Curtis Harrington. Mid-America Pictures, 1977.

Sixteen years after her boyfriend is murdered, the owner of a drive-in theatre becomes suspicious of her mute daughter as bodies pile up at her place of business.

The Shining. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1978.

A write slowly loses his mind as he and his family spend a winter in a haunted hotel.

Sister My Sister. Dir. Nancy Meckler. British Screen Productions, 1994.

Two poor sisters become maids in a wealthy widow's house, where they have a tense relationship with the widow and her daughter.

Sleepaway Camp. Dir. Robert Hiltzick. American Eagle, 1983.

The campers and counselors at a summer camp fall victim to a mysterious killer.

The Space Children. Dir. Jack Arnold, Paramount Pictures, 1958.

An alien uses telepathy to control scientists' children and convince the youths to sabotage their parents' rocket launch.

Stacy. Dir. Naoyuki Tomomatsu. 2001.

All of the world's females between the age of 15 and 17 become flesh-eating monsters.

Suddenly, Last Summer. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Horizon Pictures, 1959.

A woman tries to cover up the truth about her son's death by convincing a doctor to lobotomize her niece, who witnessed the event.

Tales That Witness Madness. Dir. Freddy Francis. World Film Services, 1973.

A psychiatrist tells the tales of four patients that went insane and ended up at the mental hospital at which he works.

Teenage Caveman. Dir. Roger Corman. Malibu Productions, 1958.

A young caveman defies the laws of his people, and explores an area that holds the secret to his people's origin.

Teenage Monster. Dir. Jacques R. Marquette. Marquette Productions, Ltd, 1958.

A boy and his father are hit by a meteor. The father dies, but the boy grows into a rampaging monster.

Teenage Zombies. Dir. Jerry Warren. GBM Productions, 1959.

A group of teenagers land on an island and encounter a female scientist that wants to turn them into mindless zombies.

Teenagers from Outer Space. Dir. Tom Graeff. Tom Graeff Productions, 1959.

An alien falls in love with a teenage girl. The two join forces to stop the aliens' brethren, who want to take over the planet.

These Are the Damned. Dir. Joseph Losey. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1963.

An American visiting England faces many dangers including a collection of radioactive children housed by the government.

The Tin Drum. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff. Argos Films, 1979.

A young boy living in 1930s Germany wills himself to stay the same age forever.

To the Devil a Daughter. Dir. Peter Sykes. Hammer Film Productions, 1976.

Satanists look to use a young girl to bring Satan to earth, but a novelist comes to her rescue.

The Twilight of the Gods. Dir. Ross Kagan Marks. Below the Belt Entertainment, 1997.

A woman ponders whether or not to keep her baby after she finds out that there's a chance he might be born gay.

Twilight Zone: The Movie. Dir. John Landis, Joe Dante, George Miller, Steven Spielberg. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1983.

Four classic tales from the original *Twilight Zone* series are retold by modern directors.

Twisted. Dir. Adam Holender. Morison Film Group, 1986.

A tech-savvy boy terrorizes his sister and baby sitter with electronic mischief.

The Unborn. Dir. Rodman Flender. Califilm, 1991.

Two parents utilize in-vitro fertilization, only to find out that they have become the victims of a mad experiment.

Venom. Dir. Piers Haggard. Morison Film Group, 1981.

Men attempt to kidnap a child but are terrorized by a black mamba snake in the process.

Village of the Damned. Dir. Wolf Rilla. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios, 1960.

An entire village inexplicably falls asleep at the same time. Later, all of the women become pregnant. The fast-growing, blond-haired progeny of these women then torment the town.

Village of the Damned. Dir. John Carpenter. Alphaville Films, 1995.

In this remake of the original film, a group of women are mysteriously impregnated and give birth to alien children.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? Dir. Robert Aldrich. The Associates and Aldrich Company, 1962.

Two women, both former actresses, live in isolation as their hostility towards each other builds.

Whisper. Dir. Stewart Hendler. Deacon Entertainment, 2007.

A little boy gets the better of his unsuspecting kidnappers.

Who Can Kill a Child? Dir. Narciso Ibanez Serrador. Penta Films, 1976.

A young tourist couple fights for their lives after they arrive on an island taken over by murderous children.

Who Ever Slew Auntie Roo? Dir. Curtis Harrington. American International Productions, 1971.

A widow throws a large Christmas party for the orphanage every year, but she lures them there for sinister purposes.

Wicked Little Things. Dir. J.S. Cardone. Millenium Films, 2006.

New residents in a small town face danger from the children who died in a mine there almost a century earlier.

The Wild Bunch. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, 1969.

A group of desperate, aging outlaws agrees to steal a shipment of weapons for a Mexican general after a failed bank heist.

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This manuscript was typed by the author.