

Demons Are a Girl's Best Friend: Queering the Revolting Child in *The Exorcist*
by Andrew Scahill

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 (28).

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 (300).

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

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 Other stands as one of the major tropes of the horror genre. Children are one of many oppressed groups, Wood states, that bring the eruption of chaos into a tenuous space of social order.¹ Several of these "othered" groups mentioned by Wood (the proletariat, women, non-white ethnicities, non-heteronormative sexuality) have been heavily 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. Further, as Andrew Tudor notes in his sociological study of the horror genre, the child-as-monster film has been uniquely able to reach a broader audience. "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" (63). What does it mean for these films, all featuring revolting children, to achieve mass success? What pleasures does the cinema of monstrous childhood offer for its ostensibly adult spectator? What does it mean for adults to look at children that notably trouble the definitional confines of childhood?

This essay will proceed by case study of *The Exorcist* and its revolting child Regan McNeil, its star Linda Blair, and the public uses of both the film and Blair's star persona in mainstream and fan magazines. Some of Regan's other dangerous sisters—Carrie White of *Carrie* (1976), Charlie McGee of *Firestarter* (1984), Gillian Bellaver from *The Fury* (1978), the possessed child from Robert Wise's *Audrey Rose*, or Jennifer Corvino from Dario Argento's *Phenomena*—may also make 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." In their puerile perversion, they combine the unlimited potential of childhood imagination with the budding danger of adult female sexuality. I argue that *The Exorcist* offers multiple sites of spectatorship: the dominant, which abjects Regan by imbuing her with unchildlike rage and queer sexuality, but also an oppositional engagement that finds more than (simply) disgust at Regan's bodily revolt—indeed a perverse pleasure. 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” (37). 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 this film—animating 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. This piece 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.

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 which 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, a revolting child no more.

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.¹¹ What is often neglected in any discussion of the film, however, 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/embodiedness 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*. This piece intervenes by

examining how *spectators* have engaged the text and its perversion of childhood innocence, and what pleasure they have gleaned from the revolting child.

The child-as-monster is a consistent and, as noted earlier, a financially lucrative horror film trope. It has its origins in the 1956 family horror film *The Bad Seed* (1956), in which a young girl named Rhoda Penmark commits murder and hides her crimes through a cunning performance of normative white childhood innocence. Other figurations, like the Hitler-Jugend aliens of *Village of the Damned* (1960), the forlorn children of *The Shining* (1980), or the youth cabals of *Children of the Corn* (1984), traffic in this horrifying combination of innocent childlike exterior and corrupted or polluted interior. There are literary antecedents as well, as in children of Henry James, whose sallow, empty faces seemed to harbor a wealth of perverse knowledge beneath their too-perfect exterior. I use the term “revolting child” to describe the monstrous children in this essay, as it describes both the state of their being and the danger of their actions. They are “revolting” in that their bodies violate natural laws and order: adults living in children’s bodies, demonically possessed bodies, animalistic bodies—they witness the kind of categorical incongruence that Julia Kristeva finds in her writing on abjection or Mary Douglas chronicles in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. But they also bodies in revolt: they traffic in the rhetoric and representational force of the “rebel,” a figure at once prized for revealing the corruption of adult society and yet vilified as disruptive and antithetic to the harmonious community. The revolting child of *The Exorcist*, I argue, rebels not just against the avatars of a patriarchal culture (the family, the church, the military, educational system), but against the very developmental narrative that upends that hierarchy.

As potent as the child is for its not-yet-becomingness, the revolting child is exponentially troubling, as s/he seems to have no need for the entry into “adulthood,” which is to say, normative development. The coming-of-age tale becomes horribly refigured as the already-of-age tale, as monstrous children claim violent rage, libidinal agency, and inappropriate knowledge assumed to be the solitary domain of adulthood. As such, the revolting child represents the failure of the “proper” development, 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.”

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 Kathryn Bond Stockton says in her work on queer childhood, “[t]he grown homosexual who 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” (289). 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 potently 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” (32). If queerness is seen as a threat to the social fabric because they represent the horror of incomplete narratives by their refusal to enter the social contract that marks them as “adult,” then the lost child, the ruined child, the rejected child, or the possessed child provide fertile terrain for queer identification.

It’s Daring! It’s Dashing! It’s Downright Demonic!

In using “queer” in this essay to correspond to a series of spectatorial engagements, I favor a broadly-defined notion of queerness that is, as Ellis Hanson says, “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” (138). Therefore, queerness in this sense is less defined by codified identities than with fantasies, identifications, and libidinal investments fall outside the parameters of heteronormative behavior. Such a diffuse definition accounts for what Alexander Doty usefully calls “the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are ‘queer’ or non-, anti-, or contra-straight” (3). Indeed, this piece takes spectatorship to be a varied, fluid, and often unruly affair, and queer reception can occur in moments, repulsions, and contradictory pleasures. 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” (97). The cinema of revolting childhood is likewise based in contradiction, animating desires within a range of pedophobic and protectionist impulses—it is that space wherein a child is literally being beaten, but a child is also beating.

In exploring the wide range of spectatorial responses to *The Exorcist*, I turn to a series of extratextual materials that address Linda Blair, the film’s star. Media accounts during the film’s release tended to center around two major issues: the visceral and violent experiences of the filmgoers in the theater, and the potential exploitation of Blair and the damage done to her innocent body. 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.ⁱⁱⁱ 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 1967 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 rape victim at the hands of the lesbian gang 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). *Born Innocent*, in particular, echoed *The Exorcist* in the extreme violence directed towards Blair's body—public outcry over the film's rape scene led to the "Family Viewing Hour" required by the FCC in 1975—and the equation of lesbianism with sadism and abjection. Advertised with the promise of "Only 14 Years Old and Already Learning about the Terrible Realities of Life," *Born Innocent* extended Blair's star persona as an endangered and violated body. In short, Linda Blair was haunted by the ghost of Regan McNeil.

Indeed, the dominant mode of audience's engagement with Blair's persona is as a victim in need of rescue: from the devil, from lesbianism, from alcoholism, from brainwashing cults. Blair hyperbolizes the cultural designation of female adolescence as a hostile terrain from which the young female body—innocent, open, endangered—must be recovered, returned, and "reoriented" to the path of normative development by the agents of patriarchal power. But there is a significant gap between the way that Blair is portrayed in mainstream magazines and the way that she is portrayed in fan 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 potential pleasures offered by *The Exorcist*. 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.

The mainstream press accounts continually reenact 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'" (40).

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" (97). 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. Interestingly, 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”—Blair’s rescue comes from the assurance that the young girl is not only heterosexual, but properly gendered as well. 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 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” 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, the reader is treated to Blair’s transformation, complete with cosmetic products that they, too, can 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. For its young female readers, the article offers a de facto guide for enforcing the homosocial/homoerotic binary, delineating what behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate within the bounds of heterosexual girlhood. If Blair’s makeover represented her recuperation from the gender-distorting perversity of *The Exorcist*, this article delineates the dangers of not toeing the line.

In contrast, the fan magazines that feature Blair are a different breed from their more 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. Blair is featured prominently on the cover of the September 1978 issue of *Rona Barrett’s Gossip*, a popular newsstand magazine from Laufer Media (which also published the teen magazines *Bop* and *Tiger Beat*.) 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 animate anxiety about their performances and the roles they performed—too sexual, too knowing, and too adultlike for their innocent bodies. Inside, the magazine gives details on “the bedeviled Linda” and her latest “possession” (12), 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 sentence).

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 “Sinsational” poster kit of “foxy Linda Blair & Exorcist pix.” 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 sacrilegious 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 aspirations for mainstream cinema success.

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. 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. We may say that this act of repurposing and transforming textual bodies is a hallmark of queer viewing. Like the film itself, Blair star image offers, for its perverse spectators, a blasphemous patron saint of the female body in revolt. Queerly, Blair’s fans arrest her development—they hold her image in stasis, never cured or rescued, “growing sideways” (as Stockton says) but not “up” into adulthood, maturity, and heteronormative sexuality.

The Revolting Body/The Body in Revolt

The liminality of Regan’s adolescent body is clearly regarded as a “problem” in *The Exorcist*—an arrested moment in which she will be guided into adulthood and normalcy by the agents of patriarchy, or be lost forever in perverse sexuality. Of those who have approached *The Exorcist* through the lens of gender and sexuality studies, Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* and Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* examine the female adolescent body in *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* as a site of vulnerability and “openness.” The bodies of Regan and Carrie are

deemed dangerous in their transitionality—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” (7). 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” (xvii).

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 an innocent taken over by demonic forces. For *The Exorcist*, I 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 that 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 break 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” (56). 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.^{iv} 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" (15).

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" (2).^v Like the discourse of child rearing itself, the specter 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. Regan's body is certainly made masculine in significant ways: she most obviously gains a gruff, butch voice courtesy of Mercedes McCambridge.^{vi} 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 ("Lesbian Bodies"). I make no claims about the literal phallicizing of Regan, though I find it difficult to ignore her lengthy phallic tongue and the scene's 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."^{vii} Regan's evolutionary regression into animalistic savagery 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:

recall 1957's *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, in which the young protagonist's 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, 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. 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 be 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 (7). 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. 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" (285). 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.

A Coming of Rage Narrative

If the film constructs the possessed Regan as a heterosexual/asexual innocent overtaken by the horrors of a perverse queer sexuality to be rescued by the agents of patriarchy, we may ask how an oppositional spectatorship finds a foothold in a text so seemingly antithetical to these pleasurable engagements. These queer uses of Blair's image in fan discourse are not mere moments of scavenging (as queer readers are often characterized), but rather as something more radioscopic that provides insight into the disavowed pleasures of the text itself. In reinterrogating the film, I offer that *The Exorcist* utilizes queerness as one of several profane signposts that mark Regan's descent into abjection and perversity. 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. However, the cinema of revolting childhood encourages 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* manufactures a dangerously perverse reading position while it simultaneously attempts to define those identificatory zones as unlivable. By taking seriously the perverse 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 Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gammon's belief that "the preferred heterosexual reading [can be] destabilized" (46) through the recalcitrance of queer reading practices. 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—an animistic fantasy of infantile rage.

Central in this film is *rage*—rage directed at the psychiatric, the medical, the parental, and the religious. It shares a common terrain with queer rage, so rarely expressed—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. Recall the bodily abjection called upon by John Rechy to characterize queer rage. 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 sacralized bounty of the homophobic order? Therein lies the perversely queer pleasure.

Since queer reading always suffers from a certain abiding deniability ("You're only seeing what you want to see..."), I close with a close reading of two parallel scenes that animate the type of queer rage that I argue permeates this film. These scenes actively court first identification with Regan's suffering body at the hands of patriarchal forces,

and then the cathartic release of her revenge against them. I offer this close reading as a textual analog to the unauthorized and perverse spectatorial responses in the fan and gossip magazines. In the first scene, 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.^{viii}

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 that 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 large 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 discomforting invasiveness is quite aggravating. What I am suggesting, of course, is that the film cultivates

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 unmasks 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" (122)—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 rescue, but one of revenge.^{ix} 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 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.

Notes

ⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱ For a few examples, see Nick Cull’s piece (“The Exorcist,” *History Today* 50.5 May 2000. 46-51.) and “Conversion of America’s Consciousness: The Rhetoric of The Exorcist” by Thomas S. Frenzt and Thomas B. Farrell (*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.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

^{iv} Though I have said that delineating authorial intention is not my purpose in this piece, 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).

^v 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.

^{vi} 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.

^{vii} 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.

^{viii} 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.

^{ix} 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.

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