

grim



Issue No. 8 February 2021

Blood Is Thicker

Family Matters & Immaculate Misconceptions

**LEGACIES OF
TRAUMA**

**PARENTING
BY CHOICE**

**APOCALYPTIC
SURROGACY**

**MOTHERHOOD v
MOTHER NATURE**

**WELCOME
to the
DOLLHOUSE**

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Special Thank You

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Editor's Note

It feels strange to be writing an Editor's Note for an issue dedicated to the theme of parenthood.

The truth is, I'm not a parent. In all honesty, I find the entire journey of pregnancy to be both frightening and horrifying—the total transformation and occupation of the body; the trials of morning sickness, bodily aches, and intense hormonal mood shifts; the risk of devastating post-patrum depression; the societal entitlement to police and judge the choices made by the expecting; and, most of all, the inherent and terrifying violence of the act of labour.

And that's only the prologue to parenthood.

As a theme, horrific parenthood serves as fertile territory (an inevitable pun that I hope you can forgive). This issue's contributors pitched a dizzying array of articles that explore the topic from a number of different angles, including infertility, generational trauma, monstrous motherhood, bad seeds, abortion, familial loss, teenage pregnancy, chosen family, and parental ambivalence.

As parenthood itself contains multitudes—joys, tragedies, fears, dreams, resignations, and hopes—I hope that this issue does an adequate job of demonstrating the infinite ways that we may approach and conceptualize this act of creation...and the ensuing 18+ years of care.

On a more personal note: this issue is lovingly dedicated to my favourite artist and dear friend CC Stapleton, proud mother of the newest and tiniest member of the *Grim* extended family, little miss Magnolia June Stapleton, to whom this issue is also dedicated. Take note of the name now, for Magnolia will one day rule the world.

Congratulations, CC and Kyle!

Valeska Griffiths
@bitchcraftTO

CC Stapleton



ccstapleton.com

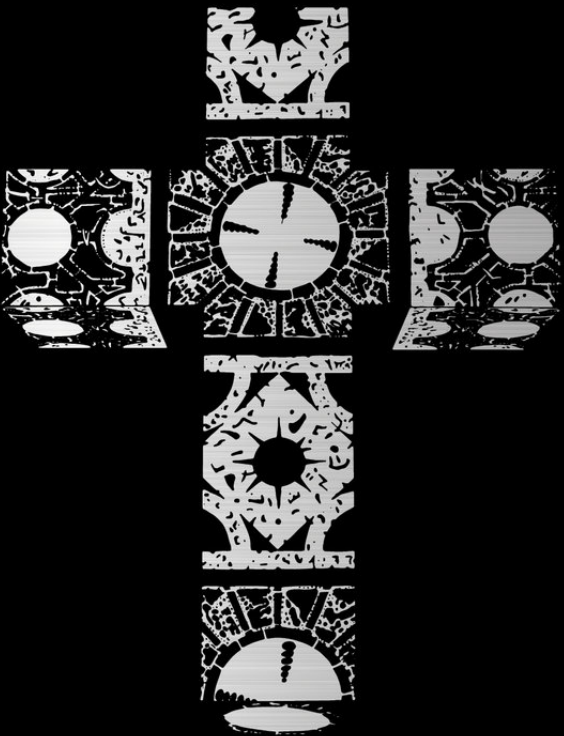


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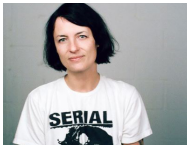
Idolatry, Religion and Worship in the Horror Film



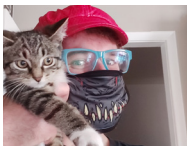
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EDITED BY REBECCA BOOTH, ERIN THOMPSON & R F TODD

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Alison Lang is a writer/editor drowning in cats in Toronto. She writes regularly for *Rue Morgue* magazine and recently joined the research and development committee for the Blood in the Snow Film Festival. She makes zines and is currently working on part two of her *Music Men Ruined for Me* series. Along with Esther Splett, she co-hosts a bi-monthly Facebook movie series called Toxic Femmes Films, focusing on movies about hags, harpies, lesbians, sluts, and monstrous women. [Photo: Heather Rappard].



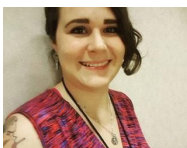
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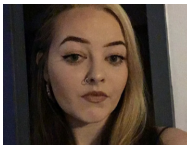
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Ellen Boyd has been a spooky nerd for as long as she can remember. She sometimes posts about her favourite topics (final girls, monstrous women, intersectional feminism, etc.) in horror on her blog FemFinal. When not preoccupied with horror and the macabre, she enjoys vintage fashion, cats, crafts, and cacti.



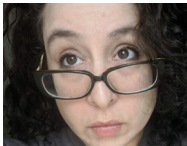
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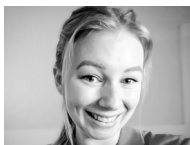
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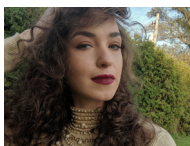
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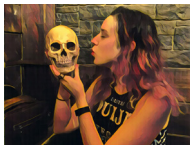
Lindsay Traves is a writer, blogger, and columnist based in the Big Smoke. After submitting her Bachelor’s thesis, “The Metaphysics of Schwarzenegger Movies,” she decided to focus on writing about her passions which include sci-fi, horror, sports, and graphic novels. She’s probably talking about *Scream* right now or convincing a stranger to watch *The Guest*. You can find her blogging @TheSmashList, recommending often missed great movies to fill your watch list, and her running internal monologue @smashtlaves.



Mary Beth McAndrews is a freelance writer based in Chicago, working towards her Master’s degree. She’s a writer for *Much Ado about Cinema* and *Nightmare on Film Street*, where she focuses on gender and horror film. When she’s not watching horror movies, she’s singing to her cat.



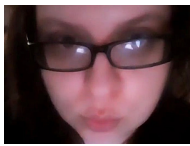
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Maternal Ambivalence: Mama & the Horror of Self-Examination

by Jessica Scott

I've never wanted kids. Don't get me wrong, I don't dislike kids. I've just never understood the desire to grow a human inside of me and then take care of them for the rest of their life. Whenever I tell people that I don't want children, I have to rush to add, "I love kids, they're just not for me" (see the second sentence of this paragraph). Because maternity is often seen as the apotheosis of womanhood, I'm compelled to justify myself and smooth over the rough edges of declaring my complete lack of interest in being a mother.

Society doesn't look kindly on people who don't want to do anything with their uteruses. Whenever people ask if I want kids (and they ask all the time), most of them don't believe or understand what I'm saying when I tell them no. Women with children tell me how wrong I am, that of *course* I want kids. How could I not? They squint at me suspiciously or assure me that I'll change my mind once my biological clock starts ticking. At the time of this writing, I'm a couple weeks shy of my 37th birthday. Believe me, I don't think that clock will ever start up.

Even if that dreaded clock does start ticking, I'm not sure that it would make much of a difference. I probably can't have kids anyway. I have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), which is a hormonal disorder with a host of side effects that have made my life miserable since adolescence: weight gain, excess hair, oily skin, and irregular periods, to name just a few. The symptoms of PCOS are everything that makes me insecure in a society that places so much value on women achieving a narrowly defined standard of beauty. The one symptom that I don't mind so much is infertility. Built-in backup birth control is the one small bonus to come out of the hell that is PCOS. Though many people with PCOS struggle with the fact that it's difficult to become pregnant (and I extend my deepest sympathies to them),

I find comfort in the fact that I'll likely never be physically capable of carrying a child. As someone with anxiety, I worry constantly about catastrophes that may befall me; it's a relief that I can cross an accidental pregnancy off that list.

I knew that I didn't want children long before I knew I had PCOS, and nothing anyone has ever said to me has swayed me in that conviction. No adorable baby food commercial or YouTube video of giggling infants has ever made me reconsider my stance for a single second. They're cute, of course, but they don't elicit any reaction from me other than a quick "Aw" before I move on with my day. It's part of the insidiousness of patriarchal society that I worry, even as I write this, that I sound cold and unfeeling. I have emotions (far too many, I fear). I love deeply and I care about children. I just don't want babies, simple as that. It doesn't make me a monster or less of a woman. It just makes me a normal person who doesn't want kids.

Society does view women like me as monstrous, though, which makes it all the more ironic that a monster movie was the only thing that ever came close to helping me understand the allure of motherhood. That movie was Andy Muschietti's *Mama* (2013), which, while technically a ghost story, features a ghost so terrifying and violent (played by Javier Botet, creature actor extraordinaire) that I feel comfortable calling the film a monster movie. *Mama* explores motherhood in heartbreaking and nuanced ways: the title character and ostensible villain is the ghost of a woman whose child was stolen from her, and the main character has motherhood thrust upon her despite her ambivalence towards it.

In the film, punk bassist Annabel (Jessica Chastain) becomes the reluctant guardian to her boyfriend Lucas's (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) two

nieces. Lost in the woods for years after the deaths of their parents, the girls are nearly feral. When a search party finds them, they're covered in dirt and twigs, hissing and scratching at anyone who comes close to them and malnourished from subsisting mainly on cherries. The girls only survived because a supernatural entity they call "Mama" provided for them as her own daughters. When the girls are reunited with their Uncle Lucas, Mama follows.

We first meet the acerbic and free-spirited Annabel as she exults over a negative pregnancy test, "Thank you, God!" When she finally meets the girls, neither one trusts her, and Annabel is more than happy to maintain that emotional distance. While Lucas is warm and eager to show the girls affection, Annabel stands back as far as she can, both physically and psychologically. When the girls move in with the couple, the barely verbal Lilly (Isabelle Nélisse) whispers, "Mama." Annabel, thinking that Lilly is referring to her, drops her forced smile and says firmly, "No. Don't call me that. I'm not your mom."

The girls' efforts to cope with their reintroduction to society send Annabel on two very different journeys. Victoria (Megan Charpentier) is a few years older than her sister Lilly, so her language skills and socialization were more advanced when Mama took them in, allowing her to reacclimate more easily to the human world. Victoria warms to Annabel quickly and clearly fears Mama despite her love for her. Though Annabel initially maintains an awkward distance toward Victoria—who withdraws in order to protect her from Mama's violent jealousy—they eventually become incredibly close. Lilly, on the other hand, doesn't remember any mother other than the Modigliani-esque spectre that has protected them for years. Fiercely loyal to Mama, she alternates between ignoring Annabel and openly antagonizing her.

Society does view women like me as monstrous, though, which makes it all the more ironic that a monster movie was the only thing that ever came close to helping me understand the allure of motherhood.

Terrified of Lilly's animalistic ferocity and frustrated with both girls' repeated spurning of any parental overtures, Annabel is dealt another blow when Lucas falls into a coma after Mama attacks him. Annabel is left alone with two traumatized girls she has no clue how to raise. She repeatedly says, "This isn't my job." She's not a mother and she doesn't want to be one. She and the girls are forced to survive together and bond, and it is in this bonding that I finally understood what it's like to feel the pull of motherhood.

Both Annabel and Mama's love for the girls affected me in ways that surprised and terrified me, but one particular scene hit me on a visceral level for which I was not at all prepared. Lilly

sneaks outside one night to play with Mama, and Annabel finds her the next morning shivering on the grass. She drags her inside the house and has to physically restrain Lilly, wrapping all her limbs around the struggling and screaming little girl so that she can warm her up. She blows on Lilly's hands and rubs them between her own to try to get some warmth into the girl, and it is in this moment that Annabel finally reaches Lilly. The girl stops wriggling and screaming, and she looks up at Annabel with such an innocent look of wonder and recognition that I felt their connection deep inside my own body.

Both child actresses give phenomenal performances, and Nélisse conveys just how deprived of human connection Lilly has been throughout her life. Mama has taken care of her for years, but she's still a ghost. She can't hug or kiss Lilly. She can't warm her up when she's cold. When Lilly realizes that Annabel can nurture her in a way that she's never consciously experienced, Lilly opens up. You can see her world expand in the newly unguarded expression on her face and the wariness dropping away from her eyes. Watching Lilly marvel at the possibility of human warmth and love made me want to take care of her and keep her warm.

Watching Lilly marvel at the possibility of human warmth and love made me want to take care of her and keep her warm.

Annabel's transformation is just as dramatic as Victoria and Lilly's. In the final scene, Mama attempts to take the girls back to her final resting place. Annabel refuses to let go, fighting with everything she has against Mama's supernatural powers to hold onto the girls—her girls—and keep them safe. Annabel's stony ambivalence to the children is gone, replaced by a fierce desire to protect and nurture them. Annabel's desperation to save the girls and hold them close is so palpable that I couldn't help but feel it, too. I wanted to save these girls; I wanted to protect them and prove to them that they deserve warmth, love, and safety.

Watching these scenes for the first time and feeling Annabel's newfound maternal desires so keenly led me to a bit of an existential crisis. Was that infernal biological clock that people kept telling me about finally starting to

tick? Was I a hypocrite—a bad feminist—for succumbing to a desire that I swore I'd never experience? I felt like I had betrayed myself and validated every smug busybody who believed they knew my thoughts better than I did. I was terrified that it had finally happened, that I had actually changed my mind about wanting kids and that my PCOS had robbed me of yet one more thing that I wanted out of life. I left the theatre reeling from these unwelcome and confusing emotions, unsure of myself in one of the few parts of my mind where I had always felt rock solid.

Horror can help us explore universal fears and explain fears to us that we may not be able to understand from first-hand experience.

Those feelings faded in time; though not as quickly as I would have liked and not without some serious soul-searching. The next time I watched *Mama*, I didn't feel that same pull I felt when I first saw Lilly look up into Annabel's eyes with cherubic wonder. I didn't feel anything missing; I simply understood Annabel's transformation from reluctant guardian to fiercely loving parent. That's what art does: it imparts understanding and empathy. Horror can help us explore universal fears and explain fears to us that we may not be able to understand from first-hand experience. It can also take us on journeys that feel real in the moment but evaporate once the credits roll.

Horror can transform viewers and reveal new parts of ourselves. My choice not to have children is not something that will change, but I did learn that I have an even greater capacity for empathy than I realized. I never want children, but Chastain's performance helped me understand what it would feel like if I did. Mama forced me to examine my own feelings and beliefs in a painful, uncomfortable moment of self-discovery. For me, the film's horror lies not only in its ghostly frights and its tale of a woman who had everything taken from her; its horror also comes from forcing me to face the parts of myself that I had never questioned. Though I reached the same answer after an agonizing internal debate, it is the act of questioning that was worthwhile. Mama didn't make me want to become a mother, but it made me search deep inside myself to come out the other side as a stronger person. **g**

Dollhouses are a staple of many childhood experiences. These small wooden structures mimic the perfect home, with a kitchen, living room, bathrooms, and multiple bedrooms, but they can be moulded into whatever the child wants. Dollhouses are a way of playing house, of envisioning what it means to have a home of your own, while also playing God for the dolls that populate this domestic space. These complex toys allow us to enact fantasies and frustrations, which is why they are a perfect metaphorical object in horror films, particularly 2019's *The Lodge* (directed by Severin Fiala and Veronika Franz) and 2018's *Hereditary* (directed by Ari Aster).

In both *Hereditary* and *The Lodge*, dollhouses and dioramas serve as aids to help characters process profound grief. *Hereditary*'s Annie (Toni Collette) uses her skills as an artist to not only create sellable pieces of art, but to work through her trauma. In *The Lodge*, Mia (Lia McHugh) uses her dollhouse to process the dissolution of her family. Through tiny dolls, miniature furniture, and meticulous attention to detail, both Annie and Mia retreat to their respective creations to either rehash or recreate their own experiences and families.

But within these realms of fantasy lies something sinister. While they play God, in a sense, both Annie and Mia are unable to escape inevitable and tragic ends. They, in turn, become the playthings, characters moulded and placed in the right spots at the right time. Their idealization of the controlled domestic space collapses as their fantasies are shattered by unknown forces.

Both films open on dollhouses, quickly establishing this uncanny motif as a crucial visual metaphor that foreshadows things to come, setting a tone of inevitability for each film—these characters are doomed. *The Lodge* begins with slow pans across an empty house. It appears to be an actual home, but it is a child's plaything—the camera reveals a family of dolls gathered around a plastic table. This scene is a construction of what Mia believes to be domestic bliss: mom, dad, and their two children seated around a Thanksgiving dinner wearing giant smiles. The dollhouse is a place of fantasy and a coveted possession of Mia, a young girl experiencing a rather uncomfortable divorce between her parents. As the camera reveals Mia's entire room, the dollhouse is shown to

Welcome to the Dollhouse

The Illusion of Controlling the Domestic

by Mary Beth McAndrews

take up a large portion of that space. This establishes its importance to Mia and the role it plays in her life, not only as entertainment but as a method of coping.

In both Hereditary and The Lodge, dollhouses and dioramas serve as aids to help characters process profound grief.

In contrast, the opening sequence of *Hereditary* immediately establishes that this film takes place in a dollhouse of sorts. It begins in a shadowed room, slowly zooming in on a dollhouse which the viewer learns is the actual home of Annie Graham and her family. As the camera gets closer, characters are seen walking between rooms and getting ready for a funeral. This stylistic choice establishes the camera as some kind of ruler or omniscient figure viewing the family and observing the calm before the storm. It's as if Paimon himself is watching over this dollhouse, placing everything in the proper spot before his reckoning.

These images of well-constructed dollhouses transition to the characters' realities, which stand in direct contrast to the mini-worlds that they control. The opening scenes of Mia's perfect and well-kept house are followed by a representation of her fractured home as her mother (Alicia Silverstone) sobs in the bathroom. The family she has gathered around the table for

Thanksgiving no longer exists, and yet Mia still clings to it, quite literally. She clutches a doll that resembles her mother while watching her real mother primp before seeing her soon-to-be-ex-husband (Richard Armitage). Mia is shown in close-up observing this ritual with a concerned look. The doll version of her mom does not feel and cannot be hurt; she is protected while Mia's real mom suffers from depression.

After her mother's death, the dollhouse and mom doll are shown again to solidify that this hand-built microcosm is a fantasy world where Mia can escape. The state of the dollhouse directly reflects her state of mind and what she is experiencing. It is not the ideal home anymore, but a controlled space where she can act out what's going on around her; it is a safe space for her to process grief. The world of the dollhouse then leaks into Mia's reality. Establishing shots of each domestic space are filmed to make them look like a dollhouse, with the camera placed high above the actors to make us feel as though we are looking down on them. Mia's grief cannot be contained into one wooden structure; it spills into her daily routine.

To cope with her traumas, Annie turns to art, specifically creating dioramas that reflect shocking moments in her life, such as her mother (Kathleen Chalfant) trying to breastfeed Annie's daughter, Charlie (Milly Shapiro), and her mother's funeral. These tragic and affecting events are frozen in time, meticulously constructed by hand with



small paintbrushes, modelling clay, and a lot of patience. During the hours it takes to construct each scene, Annie is given time to reflect on why these memories demand to be commemorated. Her dioramas are not only her livelihood—they are her coping mechanisms.

Her dioramas portray the collapse of her family and the destruction of an ideal domestic space, while showcasing that she never lived that dream.

Then, Annie is shown recreating the moment of Charlie's death, complete with her head laying on the side of the road and the bloody telephone pole that decapitated her. Annie painstakingly envisions her daughter's death, forcing herself to lay each blade of grass and paint the disembodied head. While her husband sees this as morbid, it is a valid way to process her own grief and try to gain control over the horror of her life. In placing Charlie's head on the ground and recreating the car in which the accident happened, Annie tries to understand the tragedy. Her dioramas portray the collapse of her family and the destruction of an ideal domestic space, while showcasing that she never lived that dream. Her mother, who was secretly a cult leader, ensured that their lives were anything but ordinary. No matter how much Annie tried, through marriage and motherhood, something always loomed over her. Her dioramas are her way of normalizing the trauma and making it palatable for a wider audience.

As Mia and Annie try to use these miniature recreations to control their

own stories, they are unknowingly doomed. They become like their dolls, manipulated into different positions and scenarios that place them closer to death. While her dollhouse is featured prominently in the film's beginning, Mia then heads to her father's winter home. She relinquishes control and enters the real home her dollhouse replicates. The rooms in the opening are part of a real home, which translates to the feeling that, while Mia feels in control, something else is at play. This is reinforced, as flashes of violent scenes enacted with dolls foreshadow things to come. These are not moments created by Mia, but by something unknown—something only for the audience. In short, she has entered the dollhouse.

But Annie has never left. The viewer is reminded of this as the camera zooms

out at the film's end, revealing that this horrific tableau is yet another diorama. *Hereditary* comes full circle, showing that everything that's happened to Annie and the rest of her family was carefully calculated and created. No matter what she did or how hard she fought, there was nothing she could do, as she herself was merely a figure in a cosmic dollhouse. Further, the viewer is given constant reminders that the ending is utterly inevitable. Ari Aster places hints throughout the film, from the Paimon sigil on the telephone pole that kills Charlie to the erratic behaviour of Annie's deceased father and brother. Just as Annie carefully constructs a vision of her life, so does the higher power watching her every move.

While watching these two films, the viewer is playing in a dollhouse, spectating and experiencing family trauma that will have virtually no effect on them (outside of the films' lingering emotional aftermath). They can do nothing but watch it unfold.

This is often the experience when watching horror films, but *Hereditary* and *The Lodge* compound this by making the viewer aware of the stage and world they have created for our own sick enjoyment. They want to draw attention to that and make the viewer reflect on their subject position and their voyeuristic role in filmic violence.

They play God in that cinematic dollhouse, spectating and reacting to the scripted players in front of them. *g*



Yell, Cry, Draw Pictures

Monstrous Children as Authors in *The Ring*

by Kate Bowen

Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002) has a legacy as a film about film. It is an American adaptation of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), a Japanese adaptation of Koji Suzuki's horror novel of the same name. *The Ring*'s central conceit across all adaptations—a video that murders its audience after seven days—is often cited as the texts' dramatisation of the ever-changing relationship between technology and storytelling. The film follows a reporter named Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts) and her ex-boyfriend, Noah Clay (Martin Henderson), as they investigate the death of Rachel's niece, Katie Embry (Amber Tamblyn), who watched and succumbed to a cursed videotape rumoured to murder its audience. Their investigation becomes dire when Rachel and Noah's son, Aidan (David Dorfman), accidentally watches the tape. Following clues from images in the video, Rachel and Noah trace its origin to the Morgan family, a once proud and accomplished husband-and-wife team of horse breeders. After a devastating run of miscarriages, Anna (Shannon Cochran) and Richard Morgan (Brian Cox) adopted a young girl named Samara (Daveigh Chase), but her presence supposedly incited a wave of destruction to their farm, culminating in the death of the Morgan's horses and Anna's decline into insanity. The film climaxes in Rachel's discovery that Anna murdered Samara, inciting the birth of the killer videotape in the process. As Rachel uncovers the truth of the Morgan's monstrous abuse and neglect of their daughter, she learns that to survive Samara's wrath one must make a copy of her videotape and show it to another person within seven days.

What does it mean that the author of the film's killer videotape is a young girl?

The Ring's horrific image of killer screens bearing messages of death certainly resonated with many Americans. Only

a year prior to the film's release, many shuddered and mourned as they turned on their television sets and endured report after report of the attack on the World Trade Center. September 11th, 2001 fomented the unthinkable in American culture: a nation renowned for their addiction to the idiot box was now traumatised by it ("I hate television" is actually *The Ring*'s opening line of dialogue). I cite *The Ring*'s context of production and release because 9/11 fundamentally changed the way that stories, be they fact or fiction, are told. Although America had come to hate television, I do not think that *The Ring* is necessarily a story anxious about technological mediums, but more specifically the authors and reporters of these messages. What does it mean that the author of the film's killer videotape is a young girl? I want to challenge *The Ring*'s legacy as a film about the horrors of technology by adapting its concern with authors and audiences as a metaphor for monstrous children and their parents.

The 'monstrous child' is one of horror cinema's most pervasive archetypes. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Omen* (1976) achieved

massive success, including Academy Award recognitions, and by no coincidence all share in common their fears of infants, children, or tweens. Children become objects of terror or monstrosity, film theorist Robin Wood (1986) argues, because they are a symbolic Other—a projection of the nightmares of the adult world that grown-ups try to repress (p. 67). I emphasise 'projection' because monstrous children are easily recognised on screen not just by their gaunt, pale faces and quiet, withdrawn demeanours but also by their adoption of authorship. Monstrous children sing all manner of disturbing songs, like lullabies in *The Innocents* (1961), nursery rhymes in *The Birds* (1963), and jump-rope verses in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Monstrous children create their own (imaginary?) friends in *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011), and *The Conjuring* (2013). Most importantly, monstrous children draw creepy pictures, a practice often associated with demonic or supernatural abnormalities like foresight in *Children of the Corn* (1984), shapeshifting in *Orphan* (2009), and necromancy in *Sinister* (2012). Where *The Ring* differs from the aforementioned examples is

Verbinski's conscious employment and deconstruction of the monstrous child archetype to instead demonise and vilify her parents. The film's fundamental concern is archetypes themselves and the dangers they pose in shaping cultural fears.

Gender and horror-film theorist Barbara Creed (2005) argues that monstrous children are frightening because they confuse the boundary between innocence and evil (p. 35-36). In *The Ring*, as with all monstrous children, it is Samara's childishness that makes her monstrous, but I would argue that Verbinski considers the reverse: it is Samara's monstrousness that makes her simply just another child.

Where *The Ring* differs from the aforementioned examples is Verbinski's conscious employment and deconstruction of the monstrous child archetype to instead demonise and vilify her parents.

The Ring aligns the supernatural abnormalities in Samara that would make her a monstrous child with the very human and normal (albeit nightmarish and frightening) struggles of parenthood. For instance, Samara's epithet—"she never sleeps"—describes her ghostly and haunting omnipresence in the language of the exhausted parents of a newborn awake at all hours or a tantruming child refusing bedtime. Samara also creates creepy pictures which Doctor Grasník (Jane Alexander) cites as the cause of her mother's illness: "Anna started coming to see me, said she was suffering visions. Seeing things, horrible things, like they'd been burned inside her. And it only happened around Samara, that the girl put them there." I would point out that the doctor's analysis sounds eerily like a symptom of postpartum depression (intrusive thoughts) rather than malicious authorial intent in Samara. The film never conclusively resolves this tension about who is to blame—and that is precisely the point. As Samara says of her pictures ("I don't make them, I see them and then they just...are") the same can be said for characters. Be they young or old, people are not created so much as they are how we see them and monstrosity, like beauty or innocence, exists in the eye of the beholder. To ask whether Samara



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is a 'monstrous child' or simply a human child with needs more challenging than most or a condition perhaps not yet understood is to ask the difficult question of what makes a responsible parent ("It takes work, you know, some people have limits", Doctor Grasník comments). What actually defines a parent, in *The Ring*'s narrative logic, is their ability (or lack thereof) to read others empathetically and fairly, and this negligence in spectatorship is where the film decides that Anna and Richard have failed their daughter. As Samara births her vengeful video and becomes the monstrous child that her parents claim to have always seen and abhorred, *The Ring* compares the relationship between authors and spectators to the power imbalance between children and adults.

If *The Ring* thematises the relationship between storytelling and parenting as metaphors for power, then the Morgan family find their counterpoints in the Keller family. However, it is important to specify that Samara and Aidan, as the film's respective monstrous and innocent children, are not contrasting characters, but character foils—their experiences and supernatural inclinations are quite similar but take a different trajectory depending on how their families see them. In the scene which introduces both Rachel and Aidan, Rachel has been called for a meeting with her son's teacher,

who is gravely concerned about Aidan's well-being. The teacher informs Rachel that Aidan has been incessantly drawing pictures of his cousin in various states of death: buried in the ground, drowning in the sea. Without knowing anything else about Aidan, this stereotype (drawing creepy pictures) is enough to tempt the audience to read him as a monstrous child. But Rachel intervenes. She sees past Aidan's drawings as objects of terror and correctly interprets their meaning as her son "working it out, expressing himself" in response to trauma and grief he does not understand. Whether Aidan has some supernatural power of precognition (his teacher informs Rachel that Aidan drew the pictures the week preceding Katie's death) or telepathy (throughout the film, Samara's psychic connection seems stronger with Aidan than any other character) is a question that the film refuses to answer. And as the introductory sequence to the Keller family dynamic, this scene with Aidan's creepy pictures becomes less a plot hole to be resolved than a didactic tool, a blueprint for viewing the remainder of the film. By contrasting Rachel with Anna and Richard, *The Ring* presents the audience with a choice between two spectatorial positions: engaged and active or negligent and reactive. If images are what we as viewers make of them, then it is Rachel's example of careful and considered empathy we should follow,

not the Morgans' misinterpretation of Samara and her pictures based on fearmongering and stereotyping.

I mentioned that *The Ring* conforms to Creed's research, but more specifically the film frustrates the binary logic that archetypes, like the monstrous child, depend on for definition. The project of *The Ring* is to highlight the interconnectedness of seemingly paradoxical states of being, like 'monster' and 'innocent', 'author' and 'spectator', or 'adult' and 'child'. For an adult is not so much an entirely new being as they are a child in the process of a kind of eternal becoming. Similarly, as a reporter for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Rachel is a spectator (of people and events) at the same time as she is an author (a producer of news). Her job both requires and results in embracing these contradictions rather than trying to remedy them. "It's a conundrum," Aidan says, Noah replies, "Yeah, it is," and the conversation ends—nothing more needs to be said, solved, or mused upon because paradox is not a flaw in the human experience but a facet of it. Hence, Richard's distant and pessimistic stance towards authorship, spoken in an essentialist rhetoric of a disease to be cured, is telling about his capacity to see and read others with empathy: "What is it with reporters?" he scoffs at Rachel, "You take one person's tragedy and force the world to experience it. You spread it like sickness." Rachel will later counter his assertion when she says that "[Samara] just wanted to be heard. But sometimes, children yell or cry or draw pictures..." Her reflection here summarises what the film promotes as parenting: that is, an empathetic remembering of the monster they were as a child (Rachel likewise yells and cries in the face of hardship throughout the film) rather than mindlessly clinging to archetypes of children as the picture of innocence and symbol of hope for the future. *The Ring* goes a step further than Creed's initial observation and blurs all identity categories in order to condemn the futility of all archetypes (be they positive, like 'innocent', or negative, like 'monster') which leave no room for nuance or growth.

Like the circle that gives *The Ring* its name, identity is a perpetual cycle of creation and re-creation without beginning or end (the film is likewise an adaptation of an adaptation). "Here

we go. The world is spinning. When it stops, it's just beginning," Samara sings. Her lullaby, Samara's final words before Anna murders her, becomes both a foreshadowing of her immortal confinement to the screen as well as a kind of requiem for the natural lifecycle and complex development she is denied; like a Lost Boy, Samara will never grow up. Her death, rather than catalysing change, merely exacerbates this stasis and renders her a perpetual child. In fact, death accords Samara with an even greater power of destruction, as her videotape moves from the confines of the Morgan's farm to Rachel's apartment and beyond, seemingly without limits.

How will or should Samara be remembered: as a monstrous child or a child treated monstrously?

One of the film's revelations is that images on the videotape can breach the limits of the screen and come out into the 'real' world. If images are alive or have agency, they can thus watch us as we watch them, as Samara stares back at the doctors who attempt to monitor her on their surveillance cameras. *The Ring* does the unthinkable when the sacred line between object and subject is not only crossed but decimated when Samara, like Jean-Léon Gérôme's 'Truth Coming out of Her Well', climbs out of her well and exits the television screen to murder those who fail to pass on a copy of her tape.

As Rachel discovers after Samara kills Noah, it is not enough to watch, investigate, and understand Samara. Instead, her story, a difficult truth to face though it is, demands reporting; spectatorship must become active, another kind of authorship. To extend this metaphor to the director himself, Verbinski is simultaneously spectator and author: his directorial vision has birthed something new in *The Ring*, like a father, and his work is a product of its parent texts, like a child. The film appeals for its audience to, like Samara, become another author—become the monstrous child of whom horror cinema claims to be frightened.

A contentious topic though it is, *The Ring* suggests that wanting a child does not a parent make. Instead, the film condemns 'parent' when it becomes a noun, title,

descriptor, or archetype; it suggests that identity is not static, but an active doing (in verb form, to 'parent' is to raise or to care for). Hence, as it takes a village to raise a child, all those who watch the tape are not potential victims of Samara's legacy but participants in it. Will they parent? How will or should Samara be remembered: as a monstrous child or a child treated monstrously?

Her story is a meta-commentary on how *The Ring* itself perhaps should be remembered more as a cautionary tale of the insidiousness of archetypes produced and replicated by the very media it uses to tell its story than as a film about the dangers of television. Ironical that Samara's tape is more remembered in conversations about *The Ring*'s legacy than Samara herself; arguably, the cycle of neglect is replicated here. In the image of the fly that Rachel pulls out from the tape, Verbinski asks for a more active spectatorship, rather than a 'fly on the wall' approach to viewing media. If the power of the image is preservation and the power of the illustrator is remembering, then the power of the spectator is granting a legacy. An archetype is a kind of 'legacy' gone awry, corrupted into the realm of stereotype, urban legend, or "high-school rumour" as Noah dismisses after first watching Samara's tape and refusing to believe in its danger. At best, archetypes may divide people or enforce borders around them (like a television screen) but, at worst, as *The Ring* demonstrates, they can incite neglect, abuse, and murder.

Technology in *The Ring* may be outdated upon a 2020 viewing, but the archetype of the monstrous child, like the killer video itself, lives on. What happens to the audience, as Aidan wonders about the next person he will show Samara's tape to, is another question that *The Ring* refuses to answer—because, as it always has been, it is up to us.

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Of all the horrors that can befall a parent, the death of a child is perhaps the final frontier; an occurrence that defies the natural order of things and opens a door to a mindset where the unimaginable becomes real. The musician Nick Cave wrote about this in the context of his son Arthur's death, "We are tiny, trembling clusters of atoms subsumed within grief's awesome presence." Cave continues, "Within [it] all manner of madnesses exist; ghosts and spirits and dream visitations, and everything else that we, in our anguish, will into existence." In horror narratives, the death of a child—and the overwhelming ferocity of parental love fused with grief—can lead even the most skeptical characters into a supernatural state of being, where it becomes all too easy to abandon logic, moral judgement, and sanity.

This descent into the unnatural abyss happens famously in W.W. Jacob's 1902 short story, 'The Monkey's Paw', where an elderly couple, having accidentally invoked their son's death with a wish upon that cursed appendage, use it again to wish for his return. As nightfall draws near, the father's dread rises, along with whatever has emerged from his son's earthly grave. A knock sounds at the door, and as the mother eagerly runs to open it, the father uses his final wish—and then the door is wrenched open, with no one there.

My family also has firsthand experience with similar, if slightly less grim phenomena. My grandma and I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to my mother before she died nearly a decade ago from breast cancer. We were both far away from her at the time, in different provinces, but still tethered; we felt the earth lighten as she left. Later, my grandma confessed that in those early weeks, in the depths of her mourning, she awoke a few times at 4 am to her daughter's voice, speaking clearly to her as if in mid-conversation. Neither of us are particularly spiritual or sensitive to ghosts. And yet we both agree unequivocally that this is Sheila, her daughter, my mother, closing the gap with us both.

For me, the seduction of the 'The Monkey's Paw' lies in the fact that we never do see the thing that waits on the other side of the door, allowing us to imagine all the infinite possibilities of what could have happened next. But in

A Love Stronger Than Death: Deathdream & Grief's Magical Thinking

by Alison Lang

the many cultural properties that have followed in the story's wake, we do see the trauma these families endure as a result of their wishful thinking, often in ghastly detail. In the case of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, grief-maddened doctor Louis Creed summons a murderous ghoul in the form of his dead toddler, Gage. King found the book so horrid that he famously shoved the manuscript in a drawer for a year. Then, there's the 1974 film *Deathdream*, where we not only see the thing that returns from beyond the grave, but become intimately acquainted with him and his fractured family, who shatter into pieces upon his return.

In horror narratives, the death of a child—and the overwhelming ferocity of parental love fused with grief—can lead even the most skeptical characters into a supernatural state of being...

Deathdream opens with the death of soldier Andy Brooks (Richard Backus) in Vietnam. As he is shot by a sniper the camera freezes on his face and we hear the voice of his mother, Christine (Lynn Carlin), imploring him to live. "You promised," she whispers. Meanwhile, in Andy's idyllic suburban hometown, his family, already living on pins and needles, receives the dreaded telegram. That night, the father, Charles (John Marley), is awakened by a noise and goes downstairs to find Andy standing in his uniform, waiting in the dark. The family gathers around him and laughs loudly, a little maniacally and for a little too long. Something isn't right, but mania and denial have already set in, along with their relief.

Something is very wrong with Andy, indeed. He's cold and numb, speaks in monotone, and spends most of his time sitting in a rocking chair, creaking back and forth in his bedroom; a shadow of the bright, gregarious boy the Brooks used to know and love. At night, he starts wandering around the town, spending

time in the graveyard. A truck driver is found murdered, drained of blood. Then, the Brooks' doctor dies in a similar fashion. And still, the family—especially Christine—continues doggedly onward, hoping life will somehow return to what it was.

Set against the sun-dappled backdrop of a country grappling with the collective trauma of war, *Deathdream* teases out Andy's affliction slowly. Director Bob Clark and screenwriter Alan Ormsby intended the film to serve as a blunt parable about post-war PTSD; Andy shouts "I died for you, Doc!" as he murders his doctor by draining his blood with a syringe, shooting it into Andy's own veins. But I think the film also says a lot about how grief can twist perspectives, fracture our reality and blur the lines of logic: we're all susceptible, no matter our cultural or class background, no matter how hard we try to insulate ourselves with creature comforts and false promises of safety.

Deathdream's tragedy—and, perversely, its sweetness—is Christine's devotion to Andy even as his body disintegrates in front of her and the police close in. In fact, she seems to accept Andy's death only when she surrenders to the hideous thing he's become. In her anguish, she has willed Andy back into existence, and that existence, awful though it may be, remains preferable to one without him. While her blind faith is terrible and heartbreaking, there's also something beautiful about her determined belief and the resurrecting force of maternal love.

In this way, it's all too easy to understand why Louis buried Gage in that sour, stony ground, and why the old parents in 'The Monkey's Paw' will forever wonder about the creature beyond the door, and why my grandma heard her dead daughter whispering at her bedside. This irrational and dreamlike magical thinking has a comfort in its power, as do the monsters we wish back into our lives through the temporary madness brought on by tragedy. They are our monsters, after all—the ghostly remnants of our love, returning home. *g*

INDEBTED TO INNOCENCE

Generational Trauma & Repeating Patterns in *The Turning*

by Christine Makepeace

**“Dream me back into my mother /
Dream me back and start me over”**
— Courtney Love, *The Turning* soundtrack

There’s a battle being waged in *The Turning*, the 2020 film directed by Floria Sigismondi. There’s a battle for point of view, perception, and self. There’s also a battle of wills between children and adults—a constant fight to break and maintain cycles. These battles exist in the 1898 Henry James novella *The Turn of the Screw*, but this film adaptation, set in the 1990s, tackles them differently, treating our protagonist, Kate (Mackenzie Davis), as something of a child herself. And in doing so, it introduces a question: are we ever truly free of the people who raised us?

“You don’t know what it’s like to grow up without parents,” Kate tells her roommate as she packs her things. In the exchange, Kate quietly justifies the

decision to leave her teaching job and become a modern-day governess to the orphaned Flora (Brooklynn Prince). As she packs, we see a pile of worn manila envelopes. “She’s been having a bad spell lately,” Kate confides, pushing the envelopes aside, “But I’m gonna go see her tomorrow and say goodbye.”

The “she” is Kate’s mother, Darla (Joely Richardson). As Kate traverses the halls of the mental institution her mother calls home, Alison Mosshart’s ‘I Don’t Know’ blares in her headphones. Darla sits alone in an empty pool tiled in cool blues and greens, surrounded by art supplies. As Kate pushes open the door that separates her mother from the other residents, the song fades out, leaving behind the echoing lyrics: “Is it all, in my head? Is it all, in your mind? I don’t know...”

Kate enters her mother’s realm slowly, dangling a heavy boot over the pool’s

built-in steps before plunging in. But Darla’s so preoccupied by the canvas on her easel that she can barely be bothered to acknowledge her daughter’s arrival. Seated side by side, Kate dressed in warm and comforting reds and corals, her mother in shades of blue, Kate reminds her that she’s leaving. “For the new job. You remember? I told you about that little girl, all alone with her housekeeper.” Her mother’s attention is momentarily captured, concern creasing her face. “Little girl?” she asks softly, “All on her own?” Kate bristles as her mother explains, “Well, that’s a big responsibility.”

“I know,” Kate replies, offended but also cowed. We get the sense that Kate knows all too well about little girls all alone—that she probably was one. She may still be one. “You look nice,” Darla tells her, as if seeing her for the first time. It’s uncomfortable and strained yet manages to become even more tense when Darla suddenly hands Kate the painting she’d been working on. “Take this. It’ll keep you warm,” she says cryptically. It’s a picture of Kate, striking in its accuracy, except for the fact that half of her is painted blue. And there’s an irony to it all—a mother too wrapped up in painting a portrait of her daughter to meaningfully engage with her daughter. It implies an impassable distance—an unknowable mind—a mother and daughter estranged, yet inexorably intertwined. Kate presses a kiss to her mother’s head and leaves.

A clear role reversal is on display at the bottom of the drained, dormant pool (which is, in itself, a setting that seems to vibrate with subtext). Kate acts as the parent, checking in and collecting drawings. And Darla seems lost and

unable to offer her daughter the type of support she needs.

We won’t see Darla again for the majority of the film, but her presence looms large. Our brief but telling introduction to Kate’s family is all the backstory we need to understand her journey and motivation. She is at once mother and daughter, teacher and student, and caregiver when she herself is in need of care. It’s a duality that may serve Kate well in the real world, but the house—and the children—at the centre of *The Turning* aren’t products of any world she’s encountered before.

“This can’t be real,” Kate mutters incredulously as she drives up to the enormous Fairchild estate. Aged stonework reaches to the sky while countless windows stare ominously over the property. And Kate’s right. Nothing she’ll encounter on the grounds is real, and as ambiguous as *The Turning* may appear, it screams that ambiguity at the audience from the get-go, telling us not to trust what we’re seeing: not to trust Kate. Because this isn’t the story of a haunted house. No, what traverses these musty, carpeted halls is much more sinister.

We’re introduced to the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose (Barbara Marten), Flora, and eventually her teenage brother,

Miles (Finn Wolfhard). Ancient artifacts and family heirlooms line the walls of the massive mansion. Rusty bed frames and darkened mirrors inhabit its abandoned rooms. The home itself feels at once impenetrable and too lived-in, and so do the children. Mrs. Grose describes them as “thoroughbreds,” and “privileged,” and they are. But they’re not without their own tragedies and heartbreaks. Kate sees herself in the orphaned children, but it’s clear they are nothing alike.

“She is at once mother and daughter, teacher and student, and caregiver when she herself is in need of care.”

Grose tells Kate that Flora witnessed her parents’ death in a car accident just outside the gates. The horrific event left Flora convinced she too would die if she ventured off the grounds. Content to keep the girl squirreled away in the echoing old house, Mrs. Grose is a willing participant in Flora’s delusion, never challenging the narrative. Flora is trapped—arrested—at the mercy of the sheltered life she was born into.

Miles is similarly afflicted, focusing more on the death of his father figure and riding instructor, Quint (Niall Greig Fulton). He wears Quint’s clothes and

emulates his aggressive and brutish manner. In fact, he gets kicked out of school for attacking a classmate (an incident Mrs. Grose is quick to excuse, even as she curses Quint for similar). Without any intervention or accountability, Miles turns his belligerence on Kate, harassing and tormenting her, often displaying a disquieting sexual aggression aimed directly at the new tutor. But instead of embracing the obvious explanation for his behaviours (he’s a troubled teenager with misplaced rage and feelings of deep loss, with a deplorable role model), Kate begins to fear that the ghost of Quint has somehow possessed Miles, compelling him to lash out in increasingly violent ways.

Kate sees spectral reflections of Quint and Miss Jessel (Denna Thomsen), Flora’s previous tutor, in spotted mirrors and panes of glass. The gauzy apparitions warn of future tragedy and reveal past trauma. When Kate finds Jessel’s diary, she reads of her abuse and violation at the hands of the villainous Quint. The instances bear a striking resemblance to Kate’s own run-ins with Miles. History is repeating itself.

And Kate is unraveling.

Kate can’t leave though. She is too committed to being the one unflappable





presence in Flora's life, to giving the girl something she herself never had. Kate is willing to sacrifice her comfort, safety, and sanity for a child she barely knows. After a proposed trip into town ends with Flora in hysterics, Kate does leave, only to return with apologies at the ready. She teaches Flora how to summon her "brave face," something her own mother once taught her. "I've actually been wearing mine since I was way younger than you," she confides. She attempts the same level of commiseration with Miles. "Something similar happened to me when I was your age, and I'd wished I had someone to talk to." But he's too angry and broken to care.

“Kate is the ultimate unreliable narrator, lost in the halls of the sprawling house.

Dreams bleed into reality and Kate—our eyes and ears in this world—becomes untethered. Unsure and unconfident, Kate is the ultimate unreliable narrator, lost in the halls of the sprawling house. Mrs. Grose is fast to point it out, failing to provide the still new tutor any support. She tosses a familiar envelope down in front of Kate, noting the return address. "Who is Darla?" she asks. "My mother," Kate tells her meekly. "Well, we can't choose our family," Grose muses. It's wholly uncalled for and deeply offensive, and Kate glares at her in response, red robe accentuating her gaunt face.

Kate pulls out pages from the already opened packet: they're charcoal-black and appear to show nothing but her mother's severe mental distress. "Whatever your mother has, let's hope it's not genetic," Mrs. Grose tuts before leaving the room.

She has given words to the worry gestating inside Kate. With bloody cuticles, she flips through sheet after sheet of pure black.

It's at this moment the film stops moving linearly. As we learn later, everything from this point on happens inside Kate's mind. And that's important, because what's contained in these delusions (or fantasies) is Kate's creation and speaks volumes about her mental state.

The phone in Kate's room rings, and her mother is on the other end. "I need you," she begs, "They're going to throw me out." Darla is huddled at the bottom of her barren, unfilled pool. "I think I'm seeing things," Kate whispers desperately. "Did you look at the drawings?" her frantic mother implores...ignoring the very troubling admission that leapt from Kate's mouth. And that's it, the call is over. All the mother-in-her-mind has to offer is panic, worry, and escalation.

Which is somewhat apt, as the film escalates just as quickly, reaching a fever pitch as all the things Kate has feared reveal themselves to be real: Miss Jessel is a ghost, murdered by

Quint, her body dumped in a lake on the property. Quint is a vengeful spirt, possessing Miles, and eternally raping and tormenting Jessel.

"You knew and you never did anything," Kate gasps at a frazzled Mrs. Grose. In the moment, Kate is talking about Quint and Jessel and the fallout from their relationship; however, this could also be Kate standing up for herself, demanding accountability from Grose for allowing an unchecked Miles to wreak havoc. "I've been protecting this family for a lifetime, and I won't let you near them. 'Cause you're mad, Kate," Grose argues. Her callous words are immediately followed by an appearance by Quint's ghost. He pushes Grose over a bannister to her death. In this instance, Kate's rage at a hidden truth, unprotected children, and the accusation of her unhealthy mental state manifests as ghost-Quint—similar to the way she imagines him manifesting to Miles.

With Grose unceremoniously dispatched, Kate rushes to find the children, compelled to save the wounded babes she's taken under her wing. She finds Flora, cowering in her room, and Miles, scared and pliant and ready to admit Quint's hold over him. They rush to the car, Kate and her idealized versions of the kids piling in to make their harrowing escape. Flora puts on her brave face as they careen toward the gate her trauma hadn't allowed her to pass through. But both children are steadfast, they

believe in Kate and they understand the seriousness of the situation. The car shrinks as it chugs away from the house filled with ghosts, red taillights winking in the darkness.

Except they don't. Because as we pull back, those red lights fading to an anemic black and gray, we find ourselves back in the kitchen with Kate and the charcoal drawings from her mother.

"Whatever your mother has, let's hope it's not genetic," Mrs. Grose repeats, and the air gets caught in our lungs as we realize that, maybe it is. "I guess you can't escape the inevitable," she adds before taking her leave.

“So compelled was she to be everything she never had, Kate blindly sacrifices her mental health.

In the other room, Kate hears Miles and Flora exchanging clandestine whispers. "Play it cool. She's coming," Miles urges. It's as though a fog has lifted; we're no longer privy to the dreamy paranoia inside Kate's mind. Instead, we see things closer to how they truly are. Flora is wary of Kate as she frantically approaches the children with messy hair and wild eyes. And Miles seems cocky, surprised by just how profoundly they've managed to dismantle their new houseguest.

Kate gasps as she catches sight of an antique mirror, but instead of the spectral image of Quint, we see what's always been there—nothing. Distraught, Kate grabs for Flora, the child's doll falling to the floor, its porcelain face smashing. "She's broken!" Flora cries over and over as Kate gathers the pieces.

"You can't fix it," Miles interrupts with an icy cruelty. "She's broken. Just like you."

Kate slides to the floor in a heap, Flora's sweet, little-girl voice drifting on the air. "Why is Kate crazy?" she asks innocently.


The camera zooms in on Kate's eye as dialogue heard earlier in the film repeats. It pushes in on her bed, adorned in fiery red linens, at the bottom of the empty pool. She approaches the hunched figure of

what we assume is Darla, letting out a terrified scream when the figure turns. The story ends with Kate confronting her worst fear—becoming her mother. Kate projects her frailty throughout the film. She is candid and open about all the ways she's been hurt, left, and let down. She sees these same things in the faces of two angelic orphans; in the end, that's her gravest mistake. While not undeserving of her empathy and care, the Fairchild children are unable to offer her the reciprocal affection and support she so desperately needs. And in placing the wellbeing of her wards above her own, she manages to drain—and abandon—herself.

Miles feeds off his own trauma and anguish, making it his goal to dismantle Kate the same way Quint did Miss Jessel. But Miss Jessel leaves, abandons Flora in order to protect herself, an instinct that Kate actively fights against. And all because she refused to be the one who left. So compelled was she to be everything she never had, Kate blindly sacrifices her mental health.

“Like the image of the snake eating its tail tattooed on Kate's neck, everyone is caught in a vicious cycle.

There's a hopelessness to the repetition of patterns in *The Turning*. For a brief, liberating moment we think we've broken free: Flora leaves the estate, Miles allows himself to be vulnerable, and Kate actualizes her authority to save herself and her charges. But it's a reality that exists only in her mind. The real world is much harsher.

The Turning shows us absent parents (Kate's father and the deceased Fairchilds), ineffectual and dangerous parental figures (Darla, Quint, Mrs. Grose), and broken caretakers (Miss Jessel, Kate). In fact, not one of the adults in the film successfully stewards a child into adulthood. Like the image of the snake eating its tail tattooed on Kate's neck, everyone is caught in a vicious cycle. It begs the question, are we ever free of the people who raised us? The ones who dug their fingers in and left a mark? I think Kate would answer from the bottom of her pool with a resounding "no." 

KINDER TRAUMA

10 Children Who Wrought Terror in Their Wake

by **Zelda Arena**

Children play a number of pivotal roles in horror; sometimes victims, sometimes heroes, and, at other times, the villains. The idea that children are all sweet and innocent is one to which many adults are all too eager to subscribe, particularly parents who may choose to blind themselves to the faults of their children—a fact that can be seen in life as well as on film. The reality of this (and the fact that some children are not sugar and spice and all things nice) is one enduring trope in horror, regardless of the subgenre the film falls into. From mutants, to possessed children, to ones who are just wired that way, these are ten of the most extreme cases where children were anything but innocent.

1. **RHODA PENMARK, *THE BAD SEED* (1956) — DIR. MERVYN LEROY**

Little Rhoda Penmark (Patty McCormack) is an adorable, blonde, eight-year-old who loves dresses, her father, and getting her way. Unfortunately for those around her, Rhoda is willing to go to any lengths necessary to get what she wants—even if it means murder.

Losing a penmanship competition to classmate Claude is enough of a motive for Rhoda to commit her first murder. She takes the penmanship medal and drowns him during a class picnic. Rhoda kills yet again shortly thereafter. When someone accuses her of Claude's murder, Rhoda immolates them and serenely plays the piano while her victim runs around, their body ablaze.

The film differs from the book upon which it is based due to the MPAA's Hays Code, which had a strict "crimes don't pay" policy. In the book Rhoda lives on to wreak more havoc further down the line. However, in the film, Rhoda and her mother Christine (Nancy Kelly) both survive her mother's attempts to kill the pair of them after discovering her daughter's true nature. At the end of the film, Christine is left in a coma and Rhoda is struck by lightning in the final unforgettable scene.

2. DAVID ZELLABY & THE OTHER CHILDREN, VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED (1960) – DIR. WOLF RILLA

The mutant children of Midwich village who were born to the women and girls of childbearing age there, two months after the entire village fell unconscious, all look alike; they share platinum blonde hair, striking eyes, and an odd-shaped scalp, as well as the ability to grow and learn things at an alarming rate. They communicate telepathically with one another and use their mind control abilities to coerce people into doing their bidding; much to the dismay of those around them, given that the children have a penchant for causing deaths. In one such incident, they cause a villager to crash his vehicle and then, shortly after, use their powers to make his brother shoot himself.

Although Gordon Zellaby (George Sanders), whose “son”, David (Martin Stephens), is the main child character, attempts to teach the children human ways, they remain unchanged and as big a threat as ever. Zellaby opts to arm himself with a time bomb that detonates inside a building, killing the children and Zellaby himself, in order to save the village from both the children and the threat of a Soviet nuclear shell intended to destroy them.

3. REGAN MACNEIL, THE EXORCIST (1973) – DIR. WILLIAM FRIEDKIN

Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) starts out as a regular child, but, after playing with a Ouija board and communicating with an invisible friend, she begins acting strangely. She exhibits extraordinary physical strength, uses obscene language frequently, and, during a party her mother is hosting, calmly walks in and informs an astronaut guest that he is going to “die up there,” before urinating all over the floor.

After a period of poltergeist activity, including episodes where Regan's bed shakes violently, her mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn) takes her to undergo tests, but doctors are unable to find anything physically wrong with her. However, when the director of the movie Chris is starring in dies after falling out of a window while babysitting Regan, the police lieutenant investigating the death, Kinderman (Lee. J.Cobb), consults with Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller). Chris, though not religious

herself, is willing to do anything to get her daughter back, and agrees to the exorcism recommended by both the doctors and Father Karras. The procedure is ultimately a success— but not before Regan, possessed by Pazuzu, brings about the deaths of both Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow) and Father Karras.

4. DAMIEN THORN, THE OMEN (1976) – DIR. RICHARD DONNER

After being told the baby boy his wife, Katherine (Lee Remick), had given birth to has passed away, Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) is urged by the hospital chaplain Father Spiletto, (Martin Benson), to secretly adopt another infant whose mother died giving birth to him. Robert does so, though he chooses not to inform his wife that the child, who they name Damien (Harvey Stephens), is not biologically theirs.

Damien, however, is no ordinary child and by the time he is five years old, strange things begin to occur around him. His nanny (Holly Palance) hangs herself during his fifth birthday party after exclaiming, “It's all for you, Damien!” As Damien watches, a sinister smile creeps across his face. Other bizarre events take place including a large Rottweiler appearing near the Thorn's home, Damien refusing, violently, to enter a church, and animals being terrified to be in the child's presence.

Damien later causes the death of Father Brennan (Patrick Troughton), who had warned Robert and Katherine that Damien was not human. When Robert, who is abroad, traces Damien's origins and discovers that he is the anti-Christ, he urges Katherine to leave London. Unfortunately, Damian knocks Katherine over a bannister, causing her to miscarry, and his mysterious new nanny, Mrs. Baylock (Billie Whitelaw), throws her from the window to her death.

In the end, Robert is shot to death by police as he attempts to kill Damien. *The Omen* ends with Damien's victory over the Thorn family. During the funeral for his adoptive parents, Damien observes the funeral procession and smiles eerily.

5. MICHAEL MYERS, HALLOWEEN (1978) – DIR. JOHN CARPENTER.

Michael Myers is undoubtedly one

of horror's most iconic figures. The character has become synonymous with the holiday of Hallowe'en and has an entire franchise devoted to his exploits as an adult. However, Michael's story begins when he is a child. On Hallowe'en night, 1963, six-year-old Michael (Will Sandin) murders his teenage sister Judith (Sandy Johnson) by stabbing her multiple times. He then wanders aimlessly back outside, only to be greeted by his parents as the camera pulls back and reveals the assailant to be none other than a child. In one of horror history's most iconic moments, Mr. Myers, (George O'Hanlon Jr), pulls off Michael's mask and reveals a vacant-looking child.

In the 1979 novelization, Michael, like his grandfather, suffers terrible nightmares about Enda, a disfigured Celtic teenager. The legend in the text is that Enda butchered the Druid princess Deirdre and her lover as revenge for her rejection of him. Following the murders, Enda is cursed by the king's shaman to have his soul walk the earth reliving his crime for eternity. Shortly before the murder of his sister, Michael's mother expresses her concerns about his growing antisocial behaviour. Whether you believe Michael's problem is psychological, supernatural, or both, it is never stated as fact. The ambiguity around his motives makes the proceedings all the more sinister.

6. THE CHILDREN, THE BROOD (1979) – DIR. DAVID CRONENBERG

Nola Carveth (Samantha Eggar) is a disturbed woman undergoing therapy in the Somafree institute. She is also in the middle of an acrimonious divorce from her husband, Frank (Art Hindle).

Nola's therapy is experimental. Developed by her therapist, Hal Raglan (Oliver Reed), it allows patients to let go of their suppressed emotions via physical manifestations on their body which are then removed through his talking cure. In Nola's case, the therapy has extreme and unexpected results. Through her therapy sessions, Nola's intense rage about her childhood abuse parthenogenetically births a brood of children who attack targets of Nola's rage while she remains oblivious.

The pint-sized terrors in this movie stop at nothing to lay siege to those their mother desires revenge upon. They bludgeon Nola's abusive mother,

Juliana (Nuala Fitzgerald), to death in her kitchen, not long after she tells Nola's five-year-old daughter, Candice (Cindy Hinds), that Nola was frequently hospitalized as a child and exhibited strange wheals on her skin that doctors were unable to diagnose. The brood go on to murder Nola's father, Barton, (Harry Beckman), her daughter's teacher, Ruth (Susan Hogan)—with whom Nola believes Frank to be having an affair—and finally, Raglan himself.

Ultimately, the brood of children are defeated by Frank when he strangles Nola, as they are unable to live without the psychic bond to their mother. The film's final note is far from uplifting as Candice now exhibits the same mysterious wheals Nola did as a child, hinting that similar events may be carried out by her daughter in the not too distant future.

7. PAUL MACKENZIE, TOMMY BUTTON, ELLEN CHANDLER, JANET SHORE & JANET FREEMONT, THE CHILDREN (1980) – DIR. MAX KALMANOWICZ

Five children are transformed into bloodless zombies with black fingernails after their school bus passes through a cloud of toxic yellow smoke caused by a leak at the local chemical plant. When the children do not arrive home and the abandoned bus is found near the cemetery, their parents worry that they were kidnapped. The parents' worries are short-lived as the children do return to town, but this is only the start of their problems.

It's revealed that the children's touch microwaves every living thing they put their hands on and, one by one, family members are roasted. When the zombified children wander into town, the owner of the general store is their next victim. John Freemont (Martin Shakar), father of Clarkie (Jesse Abrams) and Jenny (Clara Evans)—one of the five zombie children—is forced to kill and dismember the children, including his own daughter, with the help of local sheriff Billy Hart (Gil Rogers). The last of the five children who survives the assault, Ellen (Sarah Albright), kills the sheriff. Exhausted and disgusted, John then passes out, only to be awoken the next morning by his wife, Cathy, telling him it's time; she is in labour. Their nightmare is far from over though, as John notes with horror their newborn child has black fingernails.

8. CURTIS TAYLOR, DEBBIE BRODY & STEVEN SETON, BLOODY BIRTHDAY (1981) – DIR. ED HUNT

Curtis Taylor (Billy Jayne), Debbie Brody (Elizabeth Hoy), and Steven Seton (Andy Freeman) are born at the same time during a solar eclipse that blocks the planet Saturn, which, as explained later, is the planet with astrological influence over the way a person treats others. The implication is that something is missing from their personalities.

Ten years later this trio of terror wreak havoc on the town of Meadowvale, California. They begin systematically murdering locals, starting with a young couple who are fooling around in a cemetery. They go on to kill Debbie's father, Sheriff James Brody (Bert Kramer), and sister, Beverly (Julie Brown). They make an attempt on the lives of Joyce Russell (Lori Lethin) and her son, Timmy (K.C Martel), but are thwarted.

In the end, Debbie is able to pin all of the blame on Curtis and Steven. Her mother chooses to believe in her daughter's innocence and they flee town while Curtis and Steven are arrested, much to the shock and outrage of the townspeople. Curtis gives Joyce and Timmy a chilling smirk while being led away.

Debbie along with her mother is seen in a final scene reciting the new name her mother has told her to use, while brandishing a large car jack. Before they leave, Debbie promises her mother she will be a good girl from then on, only for the camera to pan out and reveal a driver crushed beneath a nearby truck.

9. ISAAC CHRONER, MALACHAI & THE OTHER CHILDREN, CHILDREN OF THE CORN (1984) – DIR. FRITZ KIERSCH

When the corn crop fails one year in the fictional town of Gatlin, Nebraska, an agricultural community surrounded by huge cornfields, 12-year-old Isaac Chroner (John Franklin) takes all of the children into a cornfield where he proceeds to indoctrinate them into a religious cult based around a bloodthirsty deity called “He Who Walks Behind the Rows,” with whom he makes a pact. Along with 18-year-old Malachai (Courtney Gains), his chosen second-in-command, they lead a revolution, slaughtering anyone who is 19 or older. From there on out, this

is their way of life and they sacrifice everyone when they turn 19.

Three years later, on October 31st, Malachai murders Diehl (R. G. Armstrong), the last adult left in Gatlin, who owned a gas station and made a bargain with them; his life for the fuel supply. Diehl's murder is carried out against Isaac's wishes when Diehl attempts to steer away two adults on their way to Seattle; Vicky Baxter (Linda Hamilton) and her boyfriend Burt Stanton (Peter Horton).

A rampage begins as the children perform a blood ritual on a 19-year-old who is now considered old enough for his passing to join their God in the cornfield. The children stab and pursue Burt as they capture Vicky in order to sacrifice her in the cornfield. Malachai turns on Isaac and decides to sacrifice him instead of Vicky, despite the leader's warning that the children will be severely punished if this happens as it will break the pact with “He Who Walks Behind the Rows”. Malachai does not heed these warnings and sacrifices Isaac who is shortly revived and murders Malachai.

Convinced by Burt to abandon the cult, the other children run for safety and Burt and Vicky are able to destroy the cornfield and Isaac by setting it alight, finally ending the reign of terror in Gatlin.

10. ALPINE ASSASSIN, PHENOMENA (1985) – DIR. DARIO ARGENTO

The result of a rape by mental health facility inmates, the child known only by the moniker of the Alpine Assassin (Davide Marotta), or otherwise the son of Frau Bruckner (Daria Nicolodi), is unhinged mentally and physically disfigured. He is kept chained up in a room in their house in the Swiss Alps in an effort to control his murderous impulses.

One day while his mother is out, a girl lost in the nearby location comes upon their house, enters, and calls for help. Despite being chained up, the boy exhibits a vast amount of physical strength as he frees himself of his metal chains and murders the lost girl.

This sets in motion a chain of events involving his mother, who commits multiple murders in fear and paranoia that her son will be discovered and harm would befall them both. **g**

Crisis of Consent Forced Motherhood in Horror

by Kelly Gredner

Horror is a place where honesty prevails in the tales that are told and where anyone can tell their story. Through the act of blending fantasy with reality, films can show the horrors of women's experiences. The genre provides an outlet where you can tell your deepest, darkest secrets without the worry of being shamed, ridiculed, or judged—not to mention a medium in which you can portray societal taboos in as little, or as much, grotesque imagery as you would like. Horror is a perfect place to explore the deeply personal subjects of abortion, reproductive rights, and forced motherhood.

Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Don't Breathe* (Fede Alvarez, 2016), 'Pro-Life' (John Carpenter, 2007), and *The Unborn* (Rodman Flender, 1991) show how the entitlement of organized religion and government officials forcing motherhood onto women can create monsters—of both women and babies. To provide consent and make a choice is a defining element of being human. As a woman who has chosen abortion, and has been an escort for other women in this situation, it has

strengthened my interest in the subject matter. It was enlightening, disturbing, and empowering. I know that not all women feel the same way, and that every situation is individualized. I never felt any guilt or remorse. I can, however, understand why some may feel or be made to feel like they are evil and have turned their back on womanhood.

"Kelly, you're pregnant."

Pregnancy isn't always a tearful celebration of a successful mating. For some, an unplanned pregnancy can be the start of their very own horror story. The bodily invasion of the rapidly growing embryo stirs up controversy at the moment of conception. In Canada, abortion is legal and, generally, quite accessible for up to 24 weeks of gestation. Abortion requested after the 24-week mark sometimes requires travel to the United States in order to have the procedure performed. Adding to the horror of an unwanted pregnancy is the potential of travelling to a country where the issue is so intensely contested. You risk your life just by desiring to have an abortion in a place where pro-lifers

send death threats, bombs, and gunfire to abortion providers.

"The clinic was behind a barbed wire fence and had a hidden entrance behind bullet proof glass and many doors."

Obviously, the U.S. is not as understanding or progressive; Alabama has enacted a (challenged) statute to ban the procedure and many states continuously attempt to pass anti-abortion laws. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion in all 50 states. Throughout the 1970s, however, Church and State became heavily influenced by each other, the fetus (outside of the mother) started to have a life of its own with focus being on the personhood and legal protection of it. Abortion was a sin, and women who got abortions were evil-doers going against the Christian belief of the sanctity of human life.

In 2010's *Deviled Eggs: Teratogenesis and the Gynecological Gothic in the Cinema of Monstrous Birth*, Andrew Scahill states, "As the fetus is given personhood, the maternal body is

reduced, dehumanized, and erased: to make the fetus a person means to make the mother a thing." The mothers—the women—are no longer important and it's all about the viability of the embryo, removing all sense of bodily agency and personal autonomy.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

In 2020, women are still fighting against the entitlement of predominantly white, religious men who want to control their reproductive rights. They are subjected to humiliating interrogations, unnecessary ultrasounds, long waiting lists, and potentially (if they don't have insurance or universal healthcare) expensive procedures. Women are told when and why it's okay to have an abortion. These straight, white, and often religious men claim to have a license to police women's bodies based on deeply-rooted patriarchal beliefs. Pregnancy is a sacred act related to Christian motifs of the holy vessel, therefore fulfilling our female duty of raising children is a direct service of the patriarchy; we are submitting to a higher power, and though we are "special" we also need to be contained (Arnold, 2013).

In *Don't Breathe*, The Blind Man's (Stephen Lang) daughter is killed, so he believes that the woman responsible for this wrongdoing should be "held accountable." This means using her reproductive body to mother a brand new child for him. While The Blind Man claims that he isn't a rapist, he physically restrains her and uses a turkey baster to administer his semen. In an unsettlingly authentic portrayal of this, Ron Perlman's character, Dwayne, in the *Masters of Horror* episode 'Pro-Life' is a religious fanatic adamantly opposed to abortion, so, when his 15-year-old daughter becomes pregnant and is desperately seeking one, Dwayne and his three sons violently attempt to prevent this.

In *The Unborn*, Virginia's (Brooke Adams) pregnancy is experimental due to difficulties conceiving. She goes with her husband Brad (Jeff Hayenga) to see Dr. Meyerling (James Karen) who specializes in this area. Through a secret agreement between Brad and Dr. Meyerling, the baby is created through intense genetic manipulation

and eugenics. Virginia's body, without her consent, is exploited for its ability to incubate an irregular fetus to further scientific research, an act which ends up controlling her health and challenging her autonomy.

"They first needed to induce fetal demise through a needle in my abdomen."

Unwanted pregnancies can promote a sudden uncomfortable feeling: a feeling of invasion or violation, that the fetus is like a "parasite," an unwelcome guest in your body. There is a visceral feeling that you are no longer "alone," and that something is going to go terribly wrong. It's like a tyrannical war between the body, mind, and heart (Doyle, 2019). There is a foreign danger within us that we have to get out.

In *Alien*, the forced breaking of quarantine by the droid Ash (Ian Holm) is likened to breaking the barrier of the womb, forcing motherhood onto those who don't desire it, further pushing abortion into the Othered space of horror. As the facehugger orally rapes the crew and impregnates them, it implants something outside of humanity, an unknown alien presence; all out of its primitive instinct to survive and propagate its species. Ash states that the horrific xenomorph is, "A survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." Our bodies become a battleground between mother and child, men and women, religion and liberty.

Ash is an emotionless, calculating, and manipulative synthetic human, acting like the epitome of male domination over women. He forces life onto the Nostromo, onto his crew, and into our

women. It's no surprise that when he succumbs to termination, he is filled with a white fluid akin to breast milk, a fluid that nourishes human life.

"I couldn't wait for the abortion to be over. I didn't want to be pregnant anymore."

There is real revulsion when it comes to being "with child" when you don't wish it. In horror films, this aversion to the fetus can manifest into real-life fiends. These grotesque monstrosities are either forced to term or aborted, but either way, they are destined to become the "evil twins" of the picturesque, angelic babies that we assume they ought to be—completely helpless, soft, sweet, and innocent. The unwanted children are savage, deformed, and devolved (Scahill, 2010).

Our haunted wombs create abominations that terrorize us and then, when they are released into the world despite our protests, they harm others. In 'Pro-Life', the daughter was actually raped by a demon (hence the desired abortion) and she is forced to birth its spawn which goes on to wreak havoc on the remaining people in the clinic. Feeling as if she has been tricked and that the baby growing inside of her is inhuman, Virginia actively seeks an abortion but is denied by her regular medical facility. In a last-minute attempt, she gets a back-alley procedure done for cheap, the baby thrown in the dumpster. She miraculously recovers, yet the fetus lives on to kill those who get in its way.

"My water is broken and I immediately start having painful contractions, but I know that soon it will be over."





If a woman decides to forgo her gender-fulfilling prophecy, she is stigmatised. And if she does become pregnant but seeks abortion, she is further stigmatised to the point of villainy. How dare she murder her unborn baby? Her progeny? As we hear in *The Unborn*, it's the most beautiful thing a woman can ever experience, so why would you not yearn for that? It's even stigmatised and shrouded in secrecy if a mother dares whisper the slightest words of regret when it comes to their children. Many women hesitate to get the procedure due to incessant worrying about perceived potential regret. We are deemed monstrous if we go the route of abortion, regret the abortion, or even regret having children—it's a seemingly hopeless struggle.

Virginia's pregnancy is like a demonic possession; the “feral” force inside of her changes her completely. She curses, eats raw meat, is sexually aggressive, and kills her beloved cat. Once she relieves herself of this unnatural being, and Brad finds out, he is angry and devastated. He shouts, “you killed our baby,” “how could you do this?” and leaves the house stating that she is “out of her mind.” Virginia is punished for thinking rationally and taking care of herself after realizing that what was inside of her was too dangerous to carry. This is a reality for women. The Powers That Be claim that women can't make logical decisions over their own bodies, just in case they are the 'wrong' decisions driven by hysteria. The Powers don't provide any solutions

beyond “don't get pregnant,” omitting any practical solutions. Women are monsters because they are seen as selfish when they should always be selfless. We should love and adore children, use our maternal instincts to their fullest potential, and have babies—not murder them.

“Congratulations, you're no longer pregnant.”

There are few horror films that explicitly portray abortion and pregnancy-related dilemmas. Other examples include *The Suckling* (Francis Teri, 1990), *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974), *Inseminoid* (Norman J. Warren, 1981), and *Humanoids from the Deep* (Barbara Peeters, 1980). As with the previous films discussed, these do tackle the subject of consent. Consent is crucial to being a person, and it's in our choices where we are deemed worthy of our humanity. The entitlement of religious white men who force women to be mothers causes the birth of monsters. Abortion horror shows the fear, grief, and blood that can not be ignored and are repressed by many (Skal, 1993). It reminds the viewers that women are powerful in their ability to create life, but then deemed dangerous because we can also take it away.

“I remember vividly sitting on the toilet, holding my swollen breasts when I noticed that I could squeeze milk out of them. I didn't think I would ever stop sobbing.”

When you continuously normalize the concept of ‘evil’ and ‘monsters’ based on immorality, the monsters don't just go away—they become suppressed (Burfeind, 2019). And they become psychic horrors of our reality that resurface in horror films, a place where sex, pregnancy, birth, and death thrive.

Unwanted pregnancies, like the xenomorph on the Nostromo, allude to the gynecological terror that women feel when motherhood is forced upon us. We fight the internal battle with the alien burden until we can expel it into the vacuum of the void. This is a battle we will win.

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Children of Monsters

The Universal Standards of Parenthood

by Andrew Roebuck

There's an oft-repeated aphorism acknowledging that one can choose their friends but not their family; this is especially unfortunate when your family are literal monsters. When horror franchises reach a certain level, it is all but expected for the primary antagonist to spawn some sort of offspring through which to carry on their legacy.

RKO got the ball rolling on this concept back in 1933 with Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Son of Kong*, a film which gave a son to the most iconic movie monster of them all (and was curiously released the same year as the original *King Kong*). A look at loss of innocence and redemption, *Son of Kong* continues the story of Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), who is drowning in debt due to the destruction that Kong caused in the first film. He flees from his responsibilities, ending up back on Skull Island, where he encounters Kong's son, the kind and gentle Kiko. In this, Denham sees his chance at redemption; if he can befriend and keep this giant ape safe, then perhaps his sins will be forgiven. He fails, and Kiko dies saving Denham from the sea.

A gentle disposition is a trait shared by the children of giant monsters. Their kindness represents the cultural belief that monsters are not born, they are made. The response to these cute critters is emblematic of society's ongoing issues with toxic masculinity. The male fandom looks at these creatures as inferior. Godzilla's son, Minilla, who was introduced in Jun Fukuda's *Son Of Godzilla* (1967), receives an outpouring of hatred because his gentle disposition conflicts with the ideals of masculinity. Fans want these creatures to be their fathers, causing destruction and leaving terror in their wake. It is a legacy these creatures cannot shake and it reveals a significant cultural reaction to men showing softer emotions in our society.

Godzilla, the only monster parent present to raise their child, grew a lot during his early days of parenting. In *Son of Godzilla*, he was a textbook example of a stern father unable to

deal with his son being soft. using tactics like threats of violence and tail stomps to toughen his son up. Slowly, however, we see him soften and be better to his son. No image better encapsulates this than the final image of the film, where Godzilla gently holds his son as snow falls around them—a poignant image of acceptance. In the other appearances of Minilla, his father is more supportive and caring. Even in Ryuhei Kitamura's *Godzilla Final Wars* (2004), in which Godzilla is rage personified, he listens to his son when Minilla asks him to stay his hand and spare the human race.

When the monsters are more human-sized, things tend to be more complex. In the early ages of the Universal Horror cycle, the films dealt with many monstrous children. Dracula had multiple progeny and Victor Frankenstein had a very extensive family tree. In the Universal Cycle alone, the films travel through a generation, introducing audiences to Victor's grandchildren. The two pinnacles of the parenting cycle in classic monster movies are Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and Rowland V. Lee's *Son of Frankenstein* (1939).

Dracula's Daughter is an incredibly mature story that picks up immediately following the ending of Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*. Countess Marya Zaleska (Gloria Holden), the titular daughter of Dracula, has no love for her father. She ensures that her father is put to his final resting place but it is for her sake, not his. Dracula seemed to do to her what he does to all the women in his life, gaslight them into doing his bidding. She has shed her father's name and made a life for herself. Yet even after putting him in the ground, she feels his influence. The curse of vampirism is in her blood. Her experience is a clear allegory for trauma and PTSD, though understanding of those concepts was limited in 1936. Compare Zaleska to her counterpart in Robert Siodmak's *Son of Dracula* (1943). *Dracula's Son* (Lon Chaney Jr.) is a pale imitation of his father and does everything Dracula does except call himself “Alucard,” the worst fake name in history. He's

the Donald Trump Jr. of the Universal Monsters.


The Frankensteins are obsessed with their family legacy. Wolf Frankenstein (Basil Rathbone), star of *Son of Frankenstein*, is the first to fall to his heritage. After finding his father's Monster (Boris Karloff) in a coma, he dedicates his life to resurrecting the creature and restoring his father's name. One of the most poignant moments of the film involves Wolf stumbling on his father's tomb. It has been defaced to say, “Maker of Monsters.” Wolf erases the 'Monsters' and replaces it with 'Men'. Wolf's desire to defend his father causes him to become his father; he ignores his wife and child, focusing solely on the Monster. The irony is that the Monster could have been reformed, if not for the influence of Ygor (Bela Lugosi). Ygor has formed a twisted friendship with the creature using its desire for friendship to manipulate him.

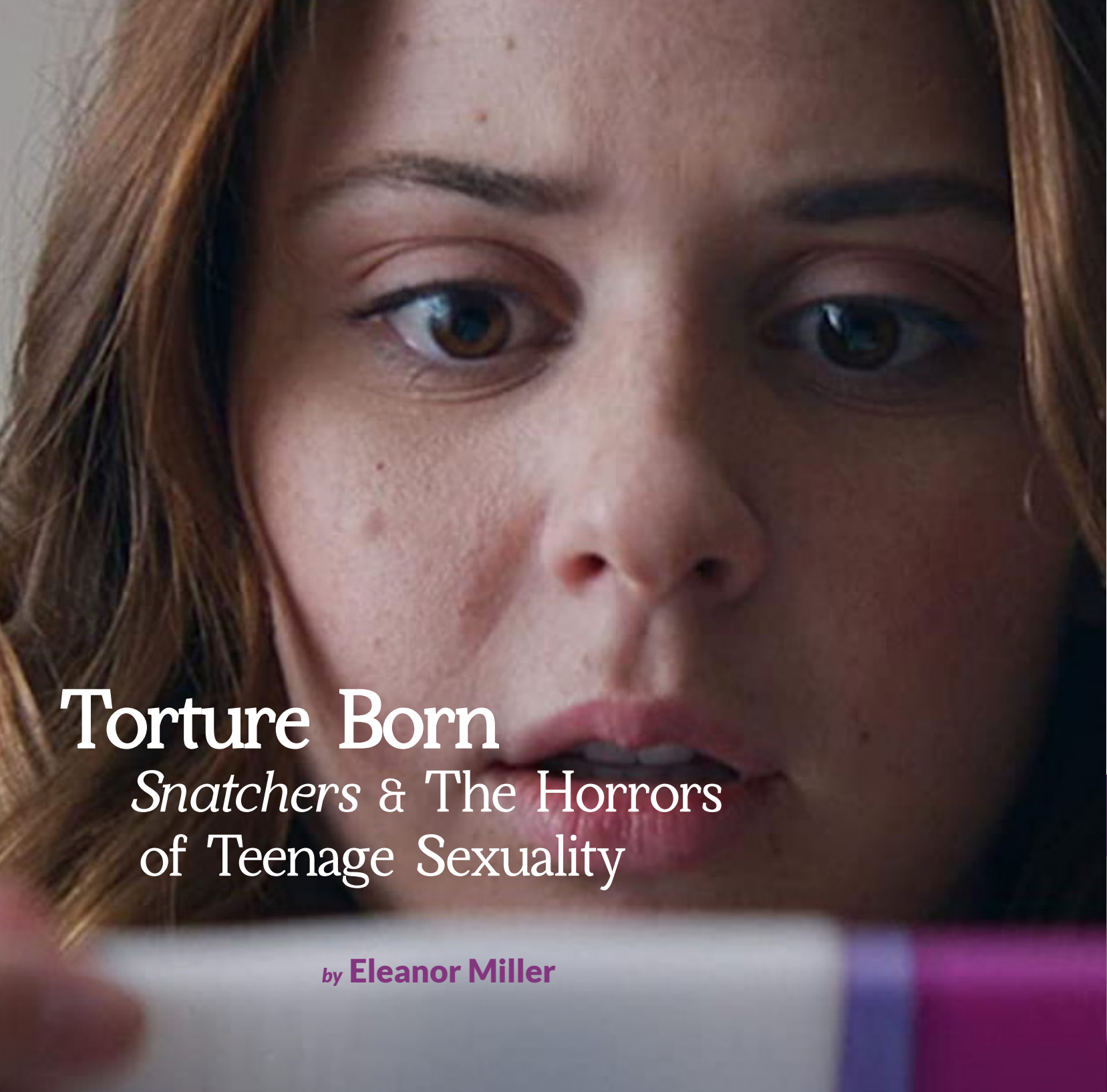
Erle C. Kenton's sequel, *Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), introduces Wolf's elder brother Ludwig (Cedric Hardwicke). Ludwig wants nothing to do with the Monster (Lon Chaney Jr.) and attempts to reform the family name with his own scientific prowess. Ludwig is a good father. However, when his father's Monster rears its head again, he suffers the fate of all Frankensteins; when he tries to use the Monster for good, he fails.

In the modern horror age, monster kids made a comeback. Jason Voorhees is the most famous horror son. Eclipsing the deeds of his mother in the original film, he became the embodiment of the 80s conservative mother's rage. Freddy Krueger has a daughter whose storyline resembles the children of real-life serial killers. Chucky has the most interesting child of this era (which was discussed in *Grim* No. 3).

As long as we have movie franchises, we will always have Monster Babies. It's up to screenwriters and filmmakers to keep tackling parenthood in unique ways. No matter what parents tell themselves, we all have our favourite children—even when they have fangs.

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Torture Born

Snatchers & The Horrors of Teenage Sexuality

by Eleanor Miller

It doesn't matter if you "only did it once"—it only takes one time to fall pregnant with infernal, alien offspring.

Sex, sexuality, and the navigation of the two dominate the teenage experience. Warnings of disease, pregnancy, and even heartbreak are drilled into the minds of (female, in particular) adolescents. Similarly, teen sex and the horror genre share an undeniable symbiotic relationship. Film

scholars, critics, and bloggers have been exploring the role of sex and sexuality in horror narratives and how the unspoken societal feelings about sex are typically explored within this (relatively) safe space. There's a puritanical inclination in the approach to such topics—we are all well aware that it's the virginal girl who will be the sole survivor of the madman's tyranny or wrongfully selected for the role of the Devil's soul-giver and able to escape. She is rewarded by the

higher powers of horror for her purity, grace, and ultimately, the muting of her sexuality.

Such presumptions, however, often ignite important discussions on the issues surrounding adolescent sexuality. The real horror within these narratives lies within the acceptance of this approach and representation of not just teenage sexuality, but female teenage sexuality in particular.

As a culture wherein female sex and sexuality is mostly hidden and balked at, conventional horror narratives serve to sustain these antiquated ideologies through a celebration of The Good Girl.

And this approach? It's boring.

Although the horror genre has progressed in terms of its exploration of female sexuality and created new, more progressive tropes, society and cultural approaches have mostly remained at a standstill. As the genre has evolved and is now a useful reflexive tool, many horror films aim to explore the horror that exists as a result of a patriarchal society.

“As a culture wherein female sex and sexuality is mostly hidden and balked at, conventional horror narratives serve to sustain these antiquated ideologies through a celebration of The Good Girl.

Stephen Cedars and Benji Kleiman's *Snatchers* (2019) utilises tropes from both the horror and comedy genres in order to highlight the true terror of damaging cultural approaches to female sexuality whilst accentuating

the sheer ridiculousness of it through moments of comedic relief. The film is a twisted, hyperbolic tale of what happens to a teenage girl after losing her virginity. The film's location within the horror-comedy genre alongside its dramatic and absurdist flair provides a satirical commentary on female sexuality, fears surrounding STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and the oppressive patriarchal approach to sexually independent women. The funniest moments emerge from juxtaposing the film's apocalyptic terror and gruesome body horror with Sara's (Mary Nepi) social priorities—whilst gestating an arachnoid parasite whose assumed goal is to take over the world, she is more troubled about what her peers and mother Kate (J.J. Nolan) may now think of her.

Sara's concerns, however, aren't entirely unreasonable. As we are (unfortunately) all too familiar with, the discourse surrounding teen pregnancies and active female sexuality positions young girls in particular as disreputable, inconsiderate sluts. With this in mind, the extreme measures Sara takes to conceal her predicament are not surprising.

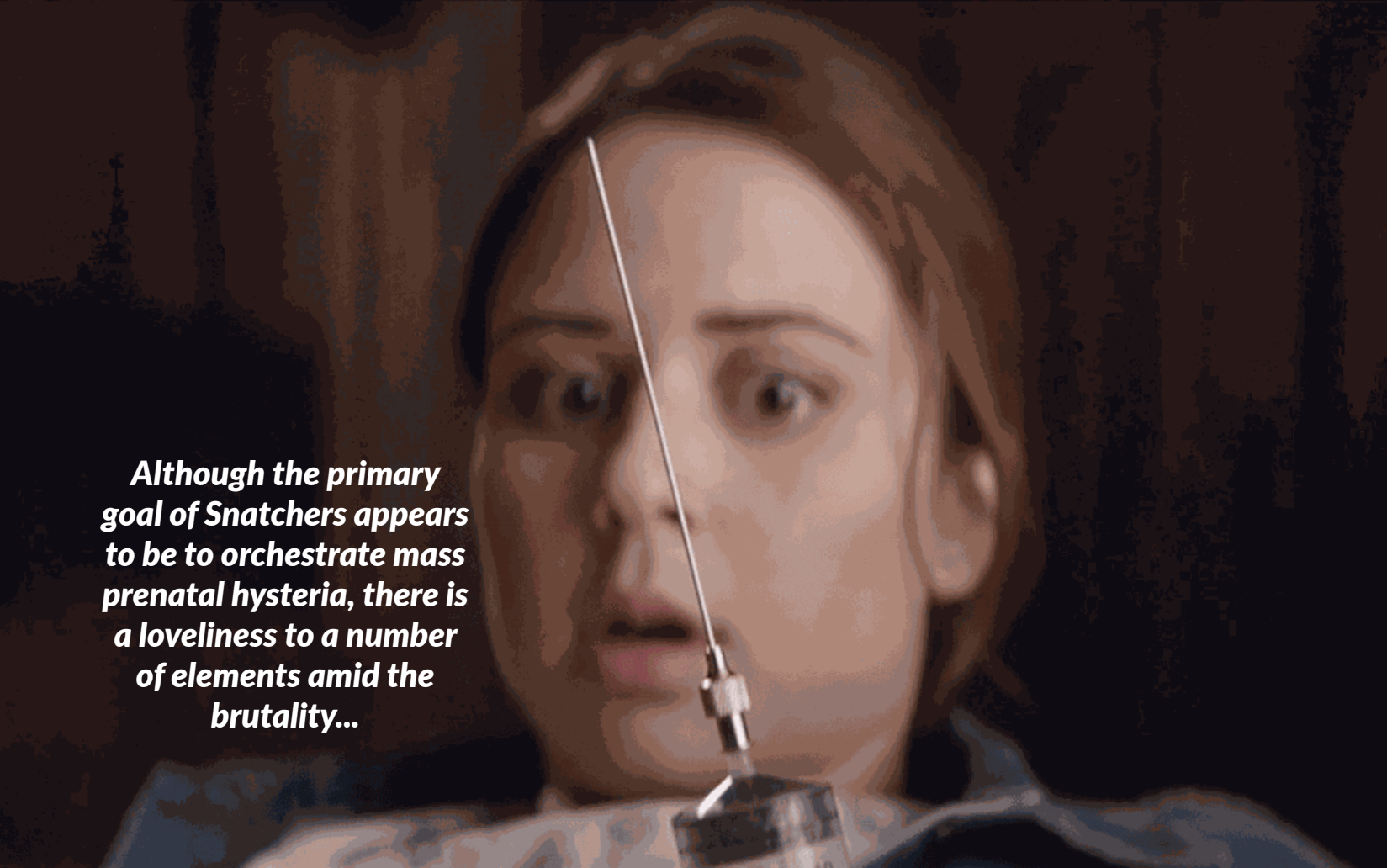
The film opens in a biology class, with a professor discussing meiosis and

sexual reproduction. This is when the audience first meets Sara. When a fellow student asks about the need for reproduction, she retorts, "because it's fun!" An interesting statement from her, as we soon learn that she is, in fact, a virgin—her previous boyfriend Skylar (Austin Fryberger) having dumped her for wanting to wait. This overt introduction to the narrative immediately thrusts the audience into the hour and a half of exaggerated commentary that is about to occur.

Snatchers follows overnight 'cool girl' Sara, who, after her very first sexual encounter, suddenly finds herself nine months pregnant in a number of days. Pregnancy can be terrifying for any woman. However, most have up to nine months to become accustomed to the changes in their bodies and the realisation of life growing inside them.

Sara is violently sick in the middle of the school corridor, which interrupts her attempt at the classic 'cool girl' slow-motion strut. Later, during lunch with her friends, she experiences rapid and extreme mood swings. Sara shifts from sarcastic asshole to blubbing wreck to cackling witch in a matter of seconds. The display leads her friends to suggest that maybe she is pregnant. She takes a pregnancy test





Although the primary goal of *Snatchers* appears to be to orchestrate mass prenatal hysteria, there is a loveliness to a number of elements amid the brutality...

for some peace of mind (blue circle for not pregnant, a blue smiley face for pregnant) which she sees as negative. She throws it in the bin and goes to sleep feeling relieved. A close-up of the contents of the bin shows the audience a smiley face appearing—then slowly turning into a gloomy frowny face.

The next morning, much to her horror, she discovers her pregnancy. Sara reaches out to her reluctant ex-best friend, Hayley (Gabrielle Elyse), and together they set out to uncover the meaning behind these rapid changes in her body.

“Instead of fixing the issue, she receives news that is far worse: the thing growing inside her is not human.”

The two girls find themselves at a free clinic (and heckled by a pro-life protestor as they enter). Instead of fixing the issue, she receives news that is far worse: the thing growing inside her is not human. Immediately, Sara goes into labour. It is a violent and sudden birth, as the baby decapitates the physician through its projectile

entry into life and manages to control the nurse through possession. Quickly, the girls escape—finding the pro-lifer now possessed by the creature in an ironic turn of events—only to be met with even worse news: there’s a second creature inside Sara, and her firstborn needs it so they can mate and commence a process of reproduction that would lead to a global takeover.

All of this action happens within the first 20 minutes of the film—perhaps a commentary on how quickly sex and, ultimately, pregnancy, can change the course of your narrative/life.


Although the primary goal of *Snatchers* appears to be to orchestrate mass prenatal hysteria, there is a loveliness to a number of elements amid the brutality: Sara and Hayley’s friendship rekindling, Kate’s projecting of fears before parental acceptance, and Sara’s ability to control her situation—the girls of the film are successfully damning the patriarchy alongside its views and expectations of sexually active young women.

Snatchers is a ferociously entertaining and aptly badass girl-power

creature feature that bestows one central message: actions may have consequences but never present hopelessness. Despite what society may suggest, every woman has options and reliable networks that will help us to seize our unexpected womb monsters.

“The girls of the film are successfully damning the patriarchy alongside its views and expectations of sexually active young women.”

The film cuts through all the horrors of unexpected pregnancy whilst approaching relevant social issues and the sometimes comedic elements of the like. It provides a more light-hearted and funny experience than a terrifying one, but Stephan Cedars and Benji Kleiman sensitively and appropriately approach an adolescent’s worst nightmare whilst providing a delicious triumph for all young expecting mothers.

Above all, *Snatchers* reminds us that whatever sex and pregnancy throw our way, it’ll never be as bad as that. 



You’re My People:

Real Monsters & Radical Families in *The Last of Us*

by Jolie Mandelbaum

You would be hard-pressed to find video game series more talked about than *The Last of Us* (TLOU) (2013 and 2020, developed by Naughty Dog). For those unfamiliar, the games chronicles the fall of humanity after the Cordyceps Brain Infection (which functions similarly to the “zombie ant fungus” *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*), decimates 60% of Earth’s population. The first game takes place roughly 20 years after the initial outbreak and follows Joel (Troy Baker), a weapons smuggler tasked with delivering a Cordyceps-immune teenager, Ellie (Ashley Johnson), to the revolutionary Fireflies in the hopes of creating a vaccine and saving mankind. Upon discovering that a cure would kill Ellie, Joel murders the only doctor capable

of making a vaccine and absconds with her, telling her the attempt was a failure. The second game follows Ellie as she wrestles with the fallout of Joel’s choice: a choice which leads to Joel’s brutal death at the hands of Abby (Laura Bailey), a sadistic former Firefly who kills him as an act of revenge thus provoking Ellie’s own quest for vengeance.

The larger gaming community continues to debate the morality of Joel’s final choice to rescue Ellie and doom humanity¹, and a similar fervour has broken out following the release of the second game, where Ellie ultimately lets Abby live. I would argue that the moral weight of Joel’s choice is given meaning through his

position as a surrogate parent for Ellie, and that Ellie’s choice is informed by the relationship between Abby and her young companion, Lev (Ian Alexander). Though the game does ask whether Joel’s choice is ultimately worth it, it also asks (repeatedly) whether we would be worth Ellie.

TLOU series is known for dispatching with certain gaming conventions. For example, you can be (and are) attacked at upgrade points and loading screens, and the game demands, sometimes clumsily, that we consider the humanity of characters typically treated as cannon fodder. This willingness to counter convention is also apparent in the game’s narrative arc. The ‘saving humanity’ trope—be

it from angry gods, a meteor, an alien invasion, or a zombie outbreak—has been one of the dominant tensions in video games for decades, from *Space Invaders* (1978, from Nishikado) to the entire *Final Fantasy* series (1987–2020, from Square and Square Enix). In contrast, *TLOU* exposes some ethical, ludonarratological tensions: it asks whether blind sacrifice is a noble goal; whether harming a small group of people for the needs of many is an ethical practice; and whether the epic is always more important, more exciting, and more interesting than the personal.

While monstrosity and horror are usually built on the back of bodily difference, monstrosity is also a moral designation. If acting like a monster is as good as being one, then the Infected do not have sole ownership of that identity in *TLOU*. Like the Infected, human groups regard others as either threats or prey, and operate with unchecked aggression. Unlike the Infected, humans chose this behavior before Cordyceps became endemic.

The game opens with the military-ordered execution of Joel's 12-year-old daughter, Sarah, on the night of

the outbreak. The first government to take over, the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA), is tyrannical and brutal, and their policy of execution upon a positive test is counterintuitive to their supposed aims. The Firefly resistance functions similarly to FEDRA, and the Fireflies, like the military, are willing to murder a child for a hair's chance of normality. The other settlements along the way consist of hunters, bandits, cannibals, and a stray pedophile.

“While monstrosity and horror are usually built on the back of bodily difference, monstrosity is also a moral designation.”

When *TLOU2*'s Washington Liberation Front evicts FEDRA, far from bringing liberty to the area, they instead begin a genocidal conquest against a neighbouring religious community, the Seraphites (who themselves have a penchant for disemboweling first and asking questions later). In California, a group called the Rattlers has re-introduced slavery.

It is entirely possible that most decent human beings are dead. The world of *TLOU* is not made for those who have an instinct to protect others, and the Fireflies, FEDRA, WLF, and Infected are more or less interchangeable. Singular humans are not necessarily evil, but anything even marginally resembling a society immediately implements all of humanity's worst and most amoral ideas. Examined in this way, it becomes unclear what, exactly, the vaccine is supposed to save. Restoring the human race to power would result in a world that looks much the same as it does now, albeit with slightly less grotesque bodies.

In this framework, Joel's choice is more ethically complex than killing Ellie to save humanity versus saving Ellie to destroy humanity, and the morality of Joel's final choice hinges on his function as a *surrogate* parent in an environment where that relationship is not only uncommon, but discouraged and dangerous.

A parent doing anything for their child is, in many cases, an uncomplicated thing. Killing someone who hurt or intends to hurt your child is one of the few acts

of intense violence that garners almost universal understanding. But Ellie is not Sarah—Ellie is some girl Joel has known for a year. Joel's willingness to look at a stranger not just as another person, but as his daughter, is a restoration of humanity, or at least a sliver of humanity worth preserving.

“Joel's turn at the end is only a turn away from the easy morality of many video games, where the life of one is never greater than the life of many...”

When confronted with the reality that even the best of us would kill a teenage girl for the slightest possibility of benefit, Joel acts in the best interest of an actual person and not a theoretical future. Joel's turn at the end is only a turn away from the easy morality of many video games, where the life of one is never greater than the life of many, where the summoner proudly marches to her death, where someone stays behind to make sure the bomb detonates, where people are always basically Good—even when they aren't.

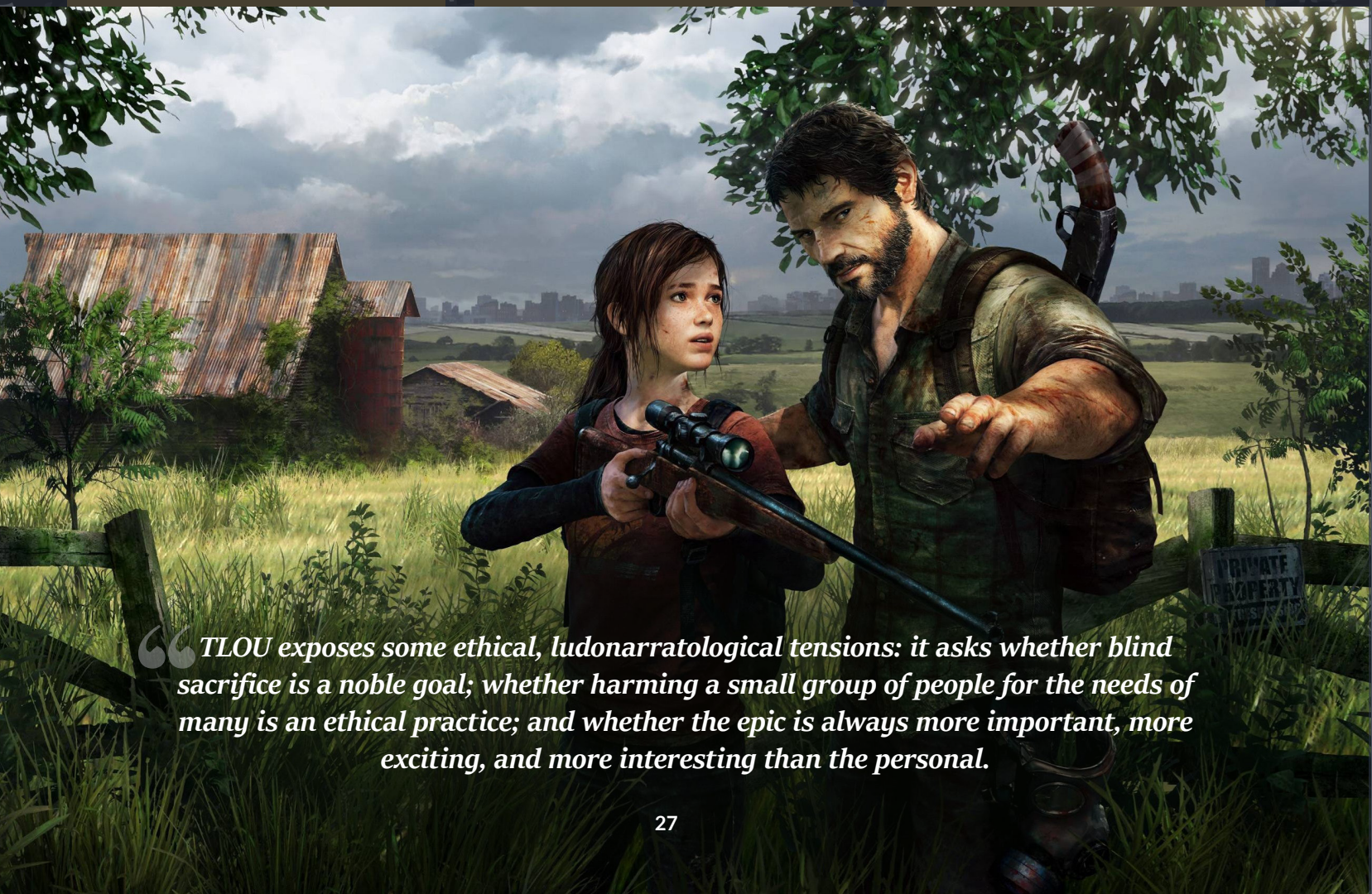
The kinder, mellower Joel we see in the second game is a far cry from the former hunter/smuggler. Though many players note that Joel does not seem like his old self. That self, the one who isn't above a little torture and murder, has no place in the civilization Joel began to build when he made the decision to act as a parent to Ellie.

Joel and Ellie are living in Jackson, which is idyllic except for the presence of a single homophobe (who is downright quaint when compared with the rest of the world). Festooned with Christmas lights, Jackson is a thriving agricultural community that includes a pub, a bakery, a butcher shop, childcare, and a small police force which clears the surrounding area of Infected, and otherwise serves only to defend the town from attack. Though the exact governing hierarchy of Jackson is never wholly defined, the structure is more or less communal. Furthermore, Jackson is packed; this is saving humanity.

Ellie makes a choice much like Joel's when she chooses to spare Abby. Though viewers long for revenge for our favourite post-apocalyptic dad, Abby's relationship with a Seraphite apostate, Lev, is a small mirror of Joel's

relationship with Ellie—a terrible person adopts a different kind of humanity through their chosen family. Joel says to Ellie in the final scene of the second game, “If somehow the Lord gave a second chance at that moment, I would do it all over again.” Though the chance doesn't show up for Joel, it does show up for Ellie, who does it all over again, turning towards a humanity that might actually be worth saving.

¹ At the time of writing, seven years after the game's initial release, there is a thread on the official Reddit sub where a user analyzes this choice through the lenses of several different ethical theorists. [g](#)





The Mother of All Monsters

Behind the Sins of Margaret White

by Savanna Teague

Making a list of the ten best mothers in horror is more of an undertaking than making a list of the worst. The protagonists' mothers tend to be oblivious, negligent, or dead; in some cases, they are all three. Few even remember the names of the protagonists' mothers, such as Pamela Fitzgerald (Mimi Rogers) from *Ginger Snaps* (2000), who proactively hides a body to protect her daughters but is woefully ignorant of what is truly going on with her own children. In horror, mothers directly responsible for birthing killers are just more memorable than those who genuinely care for their children. Dr. Martha Thomas (Desiree Gould) in *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), who enacts emotional and mental abuse on a traumatized child because of a selfish desire to have a daughter, or even Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins)'s mental approximation of his mother's behavior in *Psycho* (1960) come to mind. However, few can hold a votive candle to the mother of all bad mothers, Margaret White (Piper Laurie).

No one confuses Margaret White for a good mother in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) nor in any of its film (1976, 2013) or television (2002) iterations. Besides the aforementioned Mrs. Bates, Margaret may indeed be the worst mother in horror film history. The abuse, both physical and mental, that Margaret inflicts on her daughter, the titular Carrie, is the true horror in King's tale of teenaged telepathy. While there is no redeeming Margaret as a mother nor can there be any justification for her actions, it is still important to understand how this

character's mindset became so twisted that she could turn her only daughter into a monster in her mind, long before Carrie's powers overwhelmed her and created a real monster manufactured from pain and a need for acceptance.

The true takeaway of *Carrie* is that monsters are made and not simply born; something or someone fostered that monstrosity, nurtured that darkness until it became unavoidable. While Carrie is a sweet, sheltered girl, she snaps after being bullied both at school and in her own home. The blame for how Carrie's rage built to such a degree that she could lose control of her natural telekinetic abilities and unleash them on her classmates falls squarely at the feet of her mother, whose neglect left Carrie bereft of self-esteem and unprepared to deal with the world. Just as Carrie's monstrosity was ultimately bred from abuse, Margaret's monstrous behavior did not manifest from thin air. The same fundamentalist religious fervour and untreated mental illness that spurred Margaret to view Carrie as the epitome of sin also fueled the deep loathing that she harboured toward herself. Neither Carrie nor Margaret are pure evil; they are products of the same environment, an ouroboros of suppressed anger that could only lead to its own destruction.

Though Margaret White's backstory is not as fully explored in the films as it is in King's novel, this character study will focus on Brian De Palma's 1976 film adaptation while using the novel to flesh out details where necessary. Margaret's abhorrent behavior is not

simply the case of someone who read too many Chick tracts. Margaret is as much a product of her society and upbringing as Carrie (Sissy Spacek), but less sympathetic in this regard because she is ultimately the cause of Carrie's trauma. Margaret's adherence to her religious beliefs supersede her role as a mother, and harmful rhetoric and physical abuse are commonplace in the White household from the moment of Carrie's birth.

The true takeaway ... is that monsters are made and not simply born; something or someone fostered that monstrosity, nurtured that darkness until it became unavoidable.

A combination of fear, religious devotion, implied assault, shame, and delusions of purity produced the monster that is Margaret White, a woman who sees herself as both sinner and sinless (or the least sinful of those around her). Audiences may want to view Margaret's behaviour with skepticism and regard her beliefs as disingenuous, merely a tool through which to control and abuse her daughter. However, Margaret's fanatical belief is genuine, manifesting after the death of her own father. Unable to cope with her grief, she found solace in fundamentalist Christian teachings. Unfortunately, she also found Ralph White, who would become her husband. The doctrine to which Margaret adheres frowns upon

sexual activity, even within marriage. Despite her convictions, Margaret engages in premarital sex with Ralph, perhaps in an attempt to keep him in the relationship or simply because it was what she wanted at the time. This loss of her purity would become Margaret's greatest regret. When breaking down to Carrie, Margaret monotonously reveals, "I should have killed myself when he put it in me." Just as many Christian sects view Jesus's sacrifice on the cross as the atonement for humanity's sins, Margaret connects death with penance, yet she is conflicted as suicide cannot mask what she has done; "Sin never dies." In Margaret's fundamentalist view, Christ's sacrifice does not equate with a free ticket to Heaven, even for the most ardent of believers, and sin cannot be redressed by prayer alone. These beliefs followed her into motherhood.

When describing Carrie's conception, Margaret fixates on how Ralph, then her husband, looked at her. Just as religious fervour blinds Margaret to her own abusiveness toward Carrie, the concept of sight and question of who is allowed to gaze reoccurs throughout the film. The opening shot of frolicking feminine bodies in the locker room, hazy with steam, shifts to intimate close-ups of Carrie's body as she takes some small pleasure in the warmth of the shower spray. Her eyes remain closed through most of the scene; she is not allowed to look, but the audience is. For Carrie, this personal indulgence is quickly punished by the onset of her menarche—she finally opens her eyes, horrified to see the blood on her own hands. Though this event is just the natural progression of Carrie's body into maturity, thematically it appears that perhaps her mother's warning about lustful thoughts may have had some weight as Carrie is seemingly punished for them. However, if menstruation is the result of sin, Carrie is not punished for self-pleasure; she is punished for being the object of the gaze.

When Ralph stumbled home and gazed at Margaret, it was an unwanted look, one that she immediately feared. She knew that his gaze meant that he desired her sexually, though he promised that he would never try to have intercourse with her again. When describing how the presumably male gaze functions in cinema, Laura Mulvey (1975) argues, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as

erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (p. 11).

Margaret connects sinful behavior with not just committing sin but being the object of others' lustful thoughts. When Carrie comes home in tears after the incident in the locker room, Margaret berates her daughter, telling her that she would not have been visited by "the curse of blood" had she remained sinless. Carrie protests that she has not committed any sin, but Margaret shakes her and warns, "Don't you know by now I can see inside you? I can see the sin surely as God can!" Carrie is the object of the gaze, not just the audience's but her mother's; though Carrie is constantly watched, she is punished when she gazes.

...once Carrie was born, Margaret was forced to bear the burden of motherhood intangible proof that she was "tainted," that she too was as corruptible as anyone else.

Margaret's chastisement can also be seen as projecting. She repeats, "The first sin was intercourse," a fact that Margaret knows too well after engaging in premarital sex, with the first curse for that sin being menstruation. In King's novel, Margaret is described as being beautiful in her youth, and she may view her own pride in her appearance at that age as being what led to her eventual decision to engage in sex prior to marriage. "After the blood comes the boys, like sniffing dogs, running and slobbering and trying to find out where that smell comes from." Carrie's conception was an act of rape as Ralph "fell upon" Margaret, drunk and incensed, as she tried to pray for strength against his lust. Though she rejected his advances, Margaret feels shame in that she derived pleasure from the act. It is not uncommon that victims of assault may experience arousal from the physical sensations of the act and later feel immense guilt for their bodies' response to a horrific situation; they may even conflate that response with having invited the assault (Bass & Davis, 2008, p. 123). Margaret's confusion over her feelings, and her inability to cope with the sexual arousal she experienced while

having sin forced upon her, culminates when she is visited by the second curse: childbearing. Rather than being joyous at the prospect of motherhood, Margaret initially plans to kill Carrie at birth but cannot go through with it, blaming this on further "weakness."

Margaret's abuse of Carrie stems from her desire to control. Her religion places restrictions on behaviour in a way that requires a lack of autonomy in exchange for the eternal reward of salvation. However, Margaret fears the loss of control (as she felt when her father died and when Ralph assaulted her) and fears the weakness that led her to sin (both stemming from her engagement in premarital sex and from the physical sensations she felt while being assaulted). Prior to Carrie's conception, Margaret may have believed herself to be as close to sinless as she could have hoped to be; however, once Carrie was born, Margaret was forced to bear the burden of motherhood, intangible proof that she was "tainted," that she too was as corruptible as anyone else.

Birthing a child is the ultimate turning point for Margaret; as the mother of a newborn, she could no longer pretend to be a sinless virgin. She cannot hide from the shame of having enjoyed intercourse, and feels cursed for it. What she does hide, however, is her body, covering her form in drab cloaks and voluminous nightdresses. With Ralph felled by a construction accident prior to Carrie's birth, Margaret controls what the world sees of her. She rejects the masquerade of femininity and, by proxy, the hypocrisy of Ms. Collins (Betty Buckley)'s brand of feminism that values women's sexual autonomy only when it conforms to societal norms, i.e. women can take control of their sexuality as long as they remain sexually available to men (Lindsey, 1996, pp. 285-290). Carrie's 'liberation' and newfound confidence is constructed around being conventionally pleasing for the male gaze as she dons make-up and a pink prom dress with a plunging neckline. She is accepted by most of her peers readily the moment she receives her "pretty girl" makeover and is praised for her conformity.

If there is one positive thing to be said of Margaret, it is that she has no masquerade, and, though she goes about it in the worst way a parent could, she is not inherently wrong in trying to protect

Carrie from outside influences—particularly men's lust. While audiences react negatively to Margaret's talk of Carrie's "dirty pillows," she is keenly aware of the danger Carrie faces as a maturing young woman. Rather than arming her daughter with knowledge and self-esteem, however, Margaret chooses abuse and control. While Ms. Collins's approach is much gentler, her initial reaction to dealing with Carrie's emotional turmoil was to slap her, ordering her to "Take care of yourself!" in the same way that her mother smacks her with religious literature, urging her to admit her faults.

While claiming that she knows what Carrie is thinking, as God does, Margaret expresses her internal fears wrapped in her own narcissistic mindset. If she experiences lustful thoughts, then Carrie must indulge in them as well. This may be an expression of Margaret's need to feel supervised lest she backslide again in another moment of weakness, so she maintains vigilance over her daughter's appearance, attitude, and behaviour. Carrie is simultaneously under the watch of her mother, the dead eyes of many painted Jesuses and saints, and, occasionally, the flames of dozens of candles that, while meant to be lit as a sign of devotion, only seem to stay aflame so that no one in the household can hide from their sins. "[The] family

home, bastion of all the right virtues and laudable moral values, is built on a foundation of repressed sexual desires including those which flow between mother and daughter" (Creed, 1993, p. 35). Regarding the White household, its purposeful decoration is less a shrine to God and more Margaret's church of self, with Carrie as a captive follower. Margaret acts as the eyes and ears of God while instilling so much fear in her daughter that every action is consumed by the thought of "Would Mama be okay with this?" Something is rotten within the House of White, and it was there before the foundations were laid.

The film's deliberate and methodical placement of religious iconography is readily apparent upon first viewing, particularly the tapestry reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' which acts as a backsplash to the White's dining room. During the thunderstorm confrontation when Carrie finally stands up to her mother and announces she will attend the prom, Margaret towers over her, her body covering up several apostles. However, when seated, her position at the left side of the table coincides with that of St. Bartholomew. Artistic depictions of St. Bartholomew often present him carrying his own mangled, flayed skin as his method of martyrdom was being skinned alive. As a saint

must exist in art forever carting about their lopped off body parts, Margaret remains attached to Carrie, a sign of her sin rather than proof of righteousness. Carrie, on the opposite end of the table, is placed in the position of Simon the Zealot, who was martyred by being sawn in half. Throughout the film, Carrie is experiencing a metaphorical bifurcation, torn between being a child craving her mother's love and escaping the oppressive nature of her mother's household. She ultimately must choose between the two, but either choice would have the same result—death.

Something is rotten within the House of White, and it was there before the foundations were laid.

Margaret's desire to kill Carrie and give her "back to God"—an instinct she denied when her child was born—never went away. Her narcissistic belief that Carrie is an extension of herself keeps her from ending her child's life, until she finally listens when Carrie insists, "Please see that I'm not like you, Mama!" At this, Margaret sees a creature beyond God's help, rather than a child; thus, the decision is made. Margaret will take back the control she lost the night Ralph stumbled through the door with that "roadhouse whiskey on his breath" by any means necessary.

Without proof of her failings as a Christian or as a parent, Margaret might return to the state she had been in prior to her pregnancy—as close to sinless as possible, with death atoning for her own original sin. Even if Carrie's prom ended in roses and a goodnight kiss on the front porch from Tommy Ross (William Katt) instead of pig's blood and fire, Margaret would have been waiting with the kitchen knife all the same.

When Carrie finally gazes (with the audience sharing her fragmented point-of-view) as she stands dripping with blood at the prom, she is incapable of seeing reality. She imagines the crowd laughing and mocking her and hears her mother's warnings echoing in her ears, with all the hurt rising to the surface in a crescendo of violence. When the point-of-view switches to reality, no one is laughing except for the most awful of the high school girls; everyone is shocked and concerned. Carrie, in this moment, is most like her mother, seeing a distorted version of reality where she believes she can discern people's true nature by simply looking at them. Within a split-

second, all of the encouragement and acceptance she has been given is recast as a trick to humiliate her and lead her to sin. This results in Carrie taking control through death and destruction. She ultimately gives Margaret the atonement she craved through a martyr's death, crucified by kitchen utensils via the telekinetic powers of the girl-monster she birthed. Margaret dies with her eyes open, her vigil over her home never ending, even in death.

If Margaret embraced Carrie's otherness in her childhood as a gift, just as Jesus was gifted unto Mary for her purity, Carrie's life (and death) would have been different, but it is not a guarantee that it would have been any happier. Margaret's need to control and surveil would have overwritten any motherly instinct. Still, Margaret displays rage and mental instability on par with that of Pamela Voorhees (Betsy Palmer) from *Friday the 13th* (1980), and it is interesting to imagine what would have happened if Margaret had turned her ire against the people who hurt her child, rather than Carrie herself. The church of

self Margaret constructed collapses around her corpse, martyred to her own sense of self-worth and propriety. The charred rubble hides all trace of the broken White family from view as if they had never existed. Sin, however, never dies, and the legacy of Margaret White is one of cruelty that earns her the title of one of the worst mothers, not just in the horror genre but in cinematic history.

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MOTHERHOOD OR MOTHER NATURE?

RECASTING INFERTILITY AS ECOLOGICAL NECESSITY

by Emma Morton

Horror has long represented female infertility as a “monstrous condition” (Benshoff, 1997, p. 1). Infertility is cast as the unseen aberration within seemingly ‘normal’ women, who are forced to conceal the unnatural nature of their perfidious reproductive anatomy. On film, infertility makes women obsessed and frenzied in their obsession with obtaining a child. The unnatural qualities of infecundity places the infertile women as a threat to the pursuit of life and the heteronormative family. However, in society, the infertile woman often remains invisible. Her suffering is private and unseen through every unproductive reproductive cycle. So what happens when infertility is made not a private misfortune afflicting individual women, but a global failure to bear children? Recent television and film examples of pronatalist societies where female roles and identities are centred on reproduction, such as Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Miller, 2017 – present) and Grant Sputore’s *I Am Mother* (2019), offer new perspectives on female (in)fertility. Unlike the traditional horror trope of the infertile female as the monstrous opponent to the heteronormative family, recent cinematic examples have recast the infertile female as powerful and (in this reading at least) heroic. In a twist on the usual stigma of infertility where such women stand outside of society, these examples delineate those who suffer from infertility as part of normality.

Both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *I Am Mother* take place in worlds where the infertility of people is mirrored in barren diegetic environments.

Outside of the sterile habitat where the robot Mother (voiced by Rose Byrne) and the human Daughter (Clara Rugaard) live, *I Am Mother* is a world of chemically burnt trees and desert. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the failing ecology is reflected most starkly in the everyday interactions over the acquisition of food. The main plot revolves around the ever-increasing violence against women; nevertheless, the undercurrent of environmental destruction in both these cinematic texts acts as a backdrop to the narratives. The scarcity (and sanctity) of food, the poisoned soil, and the lack of wildlife (both visually and aurally) all allude to the origins of the fertility crisis as an environmental apocalypse.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is the ideological leader of the theocrat terrorists, Serena (Yvonne Strahovski), that sees the fertility crisis as a failure of Western culture. For Serena, environmental havoc is directly related to the cultural values held by society: mass consumerism, vacuous morality, the disintegration of heteronormative family values, and the dissolution of governmental power. For the world in which Gilead (the fictionalised state that overthrows the United States government) inhabits, it was the fertility crisis that led to an awakening of the population. So far along the path of destruction has the world come that only the imminent destruction of humanity could inspire people to join the (environmental) cause. Despite the reduced fertility of the general population, there remains an apathy to changing societal patterns of behaviour, as shown in both June (Elisabeth Moss) and Serena’s flashbacks.

While adding details to the narrative and the mystery of how capitalist America could turn into Gilead, these flashbacks offer a sustained argument in support of the terrorist action. A key flashback sequence in the episode ‘First Blood’ (S2, E6) shows Serena attending a university conference for her new book *A Woman’s Place*. In this scene, Serena is prevented from speaking to the group of students assembled—her voice is drowned out by the baying crowd. As she tries to leave the venue, the crowd blocks her way. Incensed by her inability to exercise her First Amendment right to free speech and coerced by her husband Fred (Joseph Fiennes), she screams, “You’re spoiled, you’re privileged, and you’re living in an academic bubble!” She’s not wrong. When faced with the idea of reducing society’s freedom of choice in favour of saving the planet, the crowd is unwilling to hear even a theoretical alternative to society.

This scene serves two purposes; firstly, it reminds the audience that everything possible was done to subvert capitalism, and even the most enlightened were unwilling to hear. Through the use of flashbacks, the series makes the argument that, despite the best efforts to alter the course of humanity, society did not have the political or ideological will to change, making the terrorist *coup d’état* the only viable solution. Secondly, the ‘First Blood’ flashback asks the viewer the same philosophical question: what are we willing to give up to preserve our collective existence? The scene seems to suggest that while we may use reusable coffee cups and energy-saving lightbulbs, we are unwilling

to change when asked to curb our supposed freedoms of movement and work.

Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* examined 1970s feminist utopianism, showing, “what a society would be like if those elements were fully developed” (Frye, 1973, p.26). This feminist utopia is best articulated by Aunt Lydia in the novel and in Hulu’s version:

“There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood, 1985, p. 34).

While Atwood may have been thinking of women’s freedom from violence when writing this iconic line, the notion of ‘freedom from and freedom to’ can be weaved into questions of what role society plays in structuring the meaning of infertility and parenting, as well as questions of environmental freedoms.

Linda S. Williams raises questions as to whether women’s pursuit of parenthood via IVF should be seen as the exercise of choice or as the product of social conditioning. What *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *I Am Mother* do is separate fertility and parenthood. Western society structures women’s

identities around fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. Once women are medically marked as infertile, their inability to bear children is treated as a medical problem to be fixed, much like childbirth itself has become ever more medicalised with the growth of capitalism and Western culture. The inability to get pregnant naturally, or with medical help, or to give birth naturally marks women as once more inferior. Separating fertility and parenthood offers a social solution to infertility and removes its stigma.

“While on the surface Serena and the other wives are positioned as villains, stealing children from their ‘true’ mothers, the motherhood of the wives is one of community parenting.

In Gilead, fertility is simultaneously revered and subjugated; a woman’s ability to bear children does not mark her out as morally superior. Instead, the fertility of the few is seen as an aberration, a lifeline from God that the enlightened must control to avoid further destruction. The fertile women are repeatedly shown, through June’s flashbacks, as immoral and clinging to a consumerist world. While on the surface Serena and the other wives

are positioned as villains, stealing children from their ‘true’ mothers, the motherhood of the wives is one of community parenting. Once a child enters the household, all members of the house are expected to help raise it. This shift to community parenthood reaffirms the Gilead ideology of moving away from individualism and personal gain.

The Handmaid’s Tale and *I Am Mother* place fertility at the centre of the discourse on climate action; these texts offer a more complex version of the climate change film that includes multifaceted images of consequences such as soil exhaustion, population growth, bioterrorism, and species extinction. Global environmental risk films have been the purview of Hollywood since the early 1990s, yet it is the climate change film that as Stephen Rust (2012) suggests, “deserves sustained ecocritical analysis because over the coming decades the phenomenon is expected to exacerbate existing environmental problems and to present new challenges” (p. 192). By 2050, the Institute for Economics and Peace think tank suggests that climate change and rapid population growth is expected to globally displace 1.2 billion people and drive over one-third of the Earth’s flora and fauna to extinction. Meanwhile, the United States—the world leader in CO₂ emissions per capita—continues to oscillate in its commitment to inhibiting CO₂ emissions with every new president.

This oscillation feeds into our understanding of how Gilead could come to exist. In 2007, Dan Esty, director of the Yale Centre for Environmental Law and Policy, stated, “It’s clear that the public is not waiting for the government to take the lead. Americans no longer think it’s entirely the domain of government to solve environmental problems. They expect companies to step up and address climate change and other concerns.”

While Esty believed it would be companies that would address climate change, the war on terror that began in 2001 in response to external threats is reframed in 2020 as a conflict with internal threats from civil, women’s, and—most recently—environmental rights protests, with Black Lives Matter, feminist, and climate

“Unlike the traditional horror trope of the infertile female as the monstrous opponent to the heteronormative family, recent cinematic examples have recast the infertile female as powerful and (in this reading at least) heroic.

protesters labelled as terrorists. This marks a crucial ideological shift that, if followed to its obvious conclusion, makes the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* a likely outcome.

Where *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from early climate change films is its focus not on the moment of climate awakening but on the consequences of not doing so.

As an audience, we are accustomed through other cinematic depictions of earthly destruction to root for the hero that goes against institutions and governments for the greater good of humanity—from the Marvel universe where the heroes frequently defy government authorities to save the Earth to the rebel heroes of *Star Wars* as they fight against the dark side. What *The Handmaid's Tale* does so eloquently is place the fight for the environment alongside the fight for gender (and, in the case of the novel, racial equality). Hulu's version asserts that when faced with such a crisis, only direct and radical action could hope to alter the course of humanity. In this world, the monster is not the infertile women, but a way of life that has wrought destruction on the planet. As such, Serena can be thought of as an iteration of current climate change activism from such movements as Extinction Rebellion.

Where *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from early climate change films is its focus not on the moment of climate awakening but on the consequences of not doing so. The melodrama of disaster climate films such as Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) inhabits a capitalist rationale that offers relief to the consumer audience, instilling in them the sense that individual action, and power, can alleviate climate change. As Linda Williams (2001) explains, "melodrama offers the hope that it may not be too late...that virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than [...] in revolution" (p. 35). *The Handmaid's Tale* and *I Am Mother* are antithetical to climate change films that offer easy solutions and suggest individuals have the power to enact meaningful changes through actions such as



recycling, driving less, and turning down the thermostat. As the 2020 pandemic has shown, despite the significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions during the global lockdown, it does little to curtail climate change because of the longevity of atmospheric CO₂. Even reducing the amount of greenhouse gases added to the atmosphere still increases the warming potential due to the built-up concentration over decades of industrialisation. Change, therefore, must be drastic and permanent.

Serena's character, much like the robot Mother, gives life to a new ideology. The development of Western society at the end of the eighteenth century reformulated the relationship between society and nature. The natural world became one for man to dominate through exploration and resource exploitation. Technology, secularism, and market capitalism became the triptych on which Western society was based. Through the new religion of capitalism, individuals, companies, and governments averted their moral obligation to the planet and its resources. Unlike the disaster climate films of the early 2000s, where nature is presented as James Lovelock's Gaia, the holistic world concept that rises up in response to repeated abuse by man, these films present themselves as prophetic, calling for the destabilisation of Western capitalism. The new climate narratives offer the audience no light at the end of the

tunnel; no amount of recycling will prevent this climate emergency.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS IN EXILE

In Conversation with Kaila Hier

by Valeska Griffiths

If you're a film critic (or spend much time perusing #FilmTwitter), you likely know the name Kaila Hier. A respected publicist with a yen for genre, Kaila's impactful presence can be felt in myriad areas of horror media. Her agency, Exile PR, boasts an impressive roster of past and current clients, including the Fantasia International Film Festival, the Miskatonic Institute for Horror Studies, Spectacular Optical Publications, the Brooklyn Horror Film Festival, Isa Mazzei, and Blumhouse Productions. She's promoted a fascinating roster of films, such as Mickey Keating's *Darling* (2015), Tilman Singer's *Luz* (2018), Neasa Hardiman's *Sea Fever* (2019), and Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum* (2020). And her always-engaging twitter presence offers a mix of slice-of-life humour, behind-the-scenes festival intrigue, and whip-smart insights about current issues or debates in the industry.

Even with all of this on her plate, I still managed to convince Kaila to sit down with me and discuss, entrepreneur to entrepreneur, the rewards of running your own business, the challenges of adapting to a Covid-19 world, and the joys of forging your own path within a genre that you adore.

Many people know you from your amazing twitter game, but you're also a PR genius with incredible ties in the genre community. How did you get your start in the industry? What is your origin story?

Oh gosh, you sure know how to get on my good side quickly! Thank you! I do my best, I can only hope I look as cool on Twitter as I think I do.

But, here we go: my origin story. It's pretty cute, I think. I'm born and raised in Montreal, which is where the Fantasia International Film

Festival takes place annually. At some point as a teenager, I started seeing movies there—I was pretty into weird films. I wouldn't call myself a total film buff, but I had a blossoming love for the genre, was starting to frequent the indie release shelf at my local video store, and briefly toyed with the idea of being a filmmaker.

Fantasia was just a huge delight. After a few years of going every year with friends, I think my dad suggested I volunteer, since I was a broke student back then and volunteering would mean being able to see as many movies as I wanted for free (meaning, he wouldn't have to pay), and I always had a huge list of films I wanted to check out. It didn't take long for me to fall in love with the work, as well as my fellow volunteers and the staff and programmers. For 5 years I volunteered, mostly ripping tickets at the smaller cinema so I could jump in after and watch the films, occasionally crossing paths with filmmakers and talent, and heading out to the festival bar every night with the team. It's hard to keep track of everything I saw over the years, but one memory I'm really fond of is when we hosted a spotlight on the cinema of Adam Wingard in 2007, and he and Simon Barrett were around all day, and I asked a super dumb question in a Q&A I'm still embarrassed about.

At some point, I realized my favourite thing in the world was summers spent at Fantasia, and that I could never hold onto a job that would force me to miss it. I started asking around for an internship or a spot on the team. Two girls that started volunteering the same year as me had already been offered positions on the operations team, and I was kinda like, "okay, when is it going to be my turn," ya know? But then a member of the communication team suggested me for an internship

as a press liaison. Honestly, I had no idea what communications was—but I was good at talking to folks, and so I got the gig. And never looked back, I guess? Kinda picked it up pretty fast, and before you know it, a wild career appeared.

I started getting increasingly higher tier clients and garnering some real recognition for work I'd done, and I had to make a decision on what to do and how my career was going to evolve.

You're right, that's a great origin story. And I'll resist following up about that Wingard question (you're welcome)! Since you discovered that wild career, you've launched your own agency, Exile PR. What was it like taking that leap?

I'll be honest with you, it hasn't changed much. I guess, if anything, it's mostly been a psychological shift. For a really long time I hoped some scout from a fancy PR firm would scoop me up and make all my dreams come true, but needless to say that never happened. I started getting increasingly higher-tier clients and garnering some real recognition for work I'd done, and I had to make a decision on what to do and how my career was going to evolve. Working as a freelance publicist, to me, felt like being a gun for hire, and I was starting to focus on developing my own personal brand, and thinking about long-term things like, maybe instead of working for someone else, I should start preparing to expand my own camp, and lay the groundwork to really create my own team. It took me months to come up with a name, but damn if I don't love Exile PR. Obviously, with Covid-19, my projected timeline has been affected, but hopefully in the

coming year I'll be able to really grow this firm out.

But, yeah—the biggest change has been just inside, as corny as that sounds, and knowing that I'm not going to wait around any longer for opportunities and chances to be offered, and instead going to go at things my own way, and make my own rules, and get a rush everytime I introduce myself as a founder of a company!

That's not corny at all. I felt the exact same way when I left my day job and struck out on my own at the start of this year. Being your own boss is magical! One thing I've found as an entrepreneur is the importance of alignment and fit when choosing which clients to take on. So, how do you choose the projects that you work with? What are the traits of your dream film?

Glossing over the odd times I have to take something for a paycheck or films that I take on through retainer contracts with clients, which makes up some of my release slate (though, thankfully, I've pushed to align myself with partners I respect and so the bulk of these titles are, in fact, films I can 100% get behind), I choose films that genuinely resonate and grip me.

I'm rarely good at calling out technical prowess in films, and I don't have a wide-reaching realm of film knowledge to catch things like director influences or homages in most cases. A lot of the time, I just go off my gut. I rely on that to tell me if something is good and if I can see it getting an audience really charged up. Obviously, the ideas and themes are important, and making sure there's nothing insensitive or mishandled at play, but mostly it

comes down to whether a film gets me really fucking excited or not.

I'm not sure if I can properly describe what my dream film is. It's really important to me to work with sincere filmmakers, and not ones that feel and act like they're owed anything from the world—and I've been lucky so far to work with a number of really kind and amazing and inspiring first-time feature directors, all of whom I am so excited to see further their careers. I always gravitate towards films that walk the line of what's expected of genre, and especially ones that go in a more experimental and vanguard direction.

My favourite genre is what I like to call 'crazy or evil', where the audience doesn't know if the main character is, like, crazy and suffering from delusions, or if there's demons or aliens at work, so my dream film would likely fall into this trope because it's just the most fun.

I love those films, too. What do you find most exciting about promoting genre cinema?

So, I know the question is about what's exciting about promoting genre cinema, but first I think I should go off a bit about why I'm drawn to genre cinema.

Oh, please do.

Genre cinema is great because, at its finest, it's always pushing boundaries, and turning lived experiences into elevated stories and human emotions into grandiose concepts. I attend as many non-genre events as possible, and often have to deal with dismissive brushes from people that see it as a cheap form of art, but I always stand firm in that, in so many ways, successfully telling a story through genre arguably requires more skill than a straight-up narrative film. You have to really know what you're doing to get an audience to relate through the nuance and connect to sensationalized characters who are acting out some blown-up version of reality, and that is way harder than just casting a bunch of pretty young actors to live out your vision. There's also something to be said about how genre stories can become more universally relatable

because they aren't rooted in a specific culture or societal representation, and so it's easier for the audience to attach to certain things. With that in mind, I've also found that the filmmakers that take a chance on genre storytelling are extremely passionate, talented, and insightful filmmakers that can see things beyond face value, and they've proven to be such amazing artists to work with.

All that said, I think what I enjoy most about working with genre cinema is honestly just forcing down the arbitrary barriers that have been erected around it in the industry. I love working with genre films and pushing them as the art they are, and to the critical voices who may not usually revel in more niche scenes, and making connections. It's true that within the genre there's a large spectrum, especially when looking at horror, but I'm more engaged with the art-house side of things where this rings truest. I think we're seeing a lot of big changes in this bubble over the last few years, and films like Agnieszka Smoczynska's *The Lure*, Ari Aster's *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, and, most recently, Amy Seimetz's *She Dies Tomorrow* have really paved a way for genre titles to be seen and appreciated by their merits, but looking forward to working on shedding more of the prejudice.

I couldn't agree more. You've spoken in the past about feeling uncomfortable with films getting coverage without a physical premiere. Now that we're deep into the age of Covid-19, have your feelings changed?

Yes and no. I think any filmmaker that can hold onto their film through these trying times should take advantage of that, especially if you're an emerging filmmaker, but obviously we've had to adapt to virtual in many instances.

There's no pretending that watching things virtually in our homes is an entirely different experience from watching films on the big screen. Sadly, even before Covid-19, streaming and on-demand heavily dominated the way most people have been consuming films, especially smaller indies, but because of that it makes this brief window in a film's lifespan where they can rely on physical exhibition all the more crucial, as far as I'm concerned. When you make a movie

and premiere it at a festival, you have the immense satisfaction and pride of showing it to a room of people, and my heart breaks for all the first-time filmmakers that have been denied this sense of validation. You also know that everyone in the audience is seeing it the way you intended it and, for many films with highly developed sound design, to name one aspect, this isn't just about vibes but about a technical element. To cut this out of the equation, and to have to cut out all theatrical and any hope of people seeing your film the way movies are meant to be seen, is the worst.

Your home is full of so many distractions and I don't even want to know the average number of times someone looks at their phone while watching a film on their laptop—I'm embarrassed to admit that for me that number would be very, very high, and it makes my stomach turn to know world premieres are being seen in this fashion.

If your film gets amazing reviews but then doesn't have a public screening for another eight months, the chances are pretty high that you're not going to be able to capitalize off that momentum, and the question becomes—who is your review for?

I think what you may be referring to, though, is some of my earlier call-outs for reviews of SXSW films when there were no public screenings surrounding them—and I am still very, very against films being reviewed in a vacuum without there being a launch or public-facing component. I think this shows a disconnect to the roles we all play in the ecosystem of the festival circuit—we being filmmakers, press, buyers, programmers, and publicists. I've been accused of being too traditional and close-minded occasionally, but I will die on this hill. Good reviews are most vital to a film when they can drum up buzz and direct the public to take a chance on a film, and to create an authentic buzz and word of mouth. Reviews that come out the week of a film's

theatrical release or the day of a film's festival premiere help to add to this moment, and increase lasting impact.

The average attention span exhibited by people these days isn't great, and the sheer number of movies being released is huge. So, if your film gets amazing reviews but then doesn't have a public screening for another eight months, the chances are pretty high that you're not going to be able to capitalize off that momentum, and the question becomes—who is your review for? Are you just reviewing it for your own satisfaction, without factoring in how the public can engage in it and what they can learn from following your criticism? That said, there is of course more nuance to it than just this, as can be expected when an industry is so completely uprooted, and I know producers and sales teams may take a different stance, but I sincerely hope that concessions made now do not become normalised and look forward to when we can look back on all of this and laugh sadly.

You make some great points. On a related note, I was very impressed by Fantasia's deft transition to online-only festival this year—but I'm guessing it didn't feel so effortless behind the scenes! Did you face any new challenges in your role?

There were a number of technical hurdles that came with all of our staff learning about new tech almost in real time as we were given access to the platforms. Since so few festivals had done virtual at that time, and not many on our level, there was definitely a learning curve as we figured out what we could and couldn't accomplish through our chosen hosting partner, and that really affected the ways in which we could strategise to share films with journalists. Also, things like determining how to manage embargoes for films that were playing in the on-demand library in a way where coverage could still be harnessed to best support the film required troubleshooting and switching out of regulations we usually followed.

While we cut about a week off the usual length of *Fantasia*, which runs just under a month long in its typical physical editions (excluding time done in prep and post), we still had a monstrous line-up of over 100

Photo: Uriah Marc Todoroff

films—140, I think? Or was it 150? In a normal year, reporting in for those three weeks is a hugely challenging feat that we all do through commitment and passion, and communication amongst staff is really invaluable. Working as we were from home and scattered around the world, it was really difficult to manage the festival without having easy access to peers, and I mean this in a functional sense but also, like, emotionally. Successfully pulling off a year at Fantasia is like film festival bootcamp, and the thing that really helps everyone on the team get through it without breaking is the support we can gather from each other and the family-like community that develops when you see the same people every day for a month for 10 or more hours a day. Without that social aspect, you really quickly get burnt out, and it honestly just doesn't even feel like the same event when you're in the thick of it.

As audiences have become more acclimated to the online festival experience, do you think that this mode of delivery will maintain its importance post-Covid, as a robust complement to the traditional festival experience?

Ha, well, I hope not. I think the current trend is causing a lot of confusion with audiences and consumers about the difference in a film playing a festival and the accessibility of a film doing theatrical, virtual or otherwise, and VOD, and instead it's turning it all into a homogeneous moment where everyone expects access to everything instantly. There is a reason that certain tiers of festivals are harder to attend than others. Despite what some people may think, it's not purely elitism, but part of a bigger picture that helps support films, filmmakers, and independent communities.

To backtrack a bit, I really get sour when people talk about how it's not fair that things like Sundance and SXSW are not accessible to them and get angry when they can't see films world-premiering there. Because more often than not this person has a regional festival, genre or otherwise, playing most of these heavy-hitter acclaimed titles and is almost definitely struggling to sell tickets and make a profit and stay operating, and is likely run by a hugely passionate and committed team. Films being programmed around the country

at these festivals offer important opportunities for filmmakers to attend and meet other filmmakers, and to connect with fans and unique cinema circles apart from their own. There's a seemingly adopted blindness to the importance of the filmmaker in all this, as well as for supporting local cinema scenes, which includes the venues that come with them, and this just looking at the period before theatrical even takes off.

I don't want people to go to a cinema unless they feel safe doing it, but I'm tremendously worried about what the long-term impact of that can come from demanding and expecting consistent integration of virtual public screenings.

The vast majority of online festivals are, so far, country locked, while state-set geolocking has proven to be unreliable (though one can argue that that technology can improve), which makes programming tricky when we throw away the concept of regional audiences. This brings into question how to newly define premiere statuses—which I understand some folks may want to toss aside, but there's a method to the madness, and to completely do away with them would remove a huge chunk of agency from the film industry.

If major festivals decide to offer a digital component, then what's the imperative for smaller festivals to program titles, and to work so hard to put together their annual editions, and—even more concerning—how will their attendance be impacted when their communities and developed audience bases can just see the films earlier at bigger festivals first? I know some festivals have done quite well numbers-wise from virtual festivals, and that's great to see and hear, but long-term I see the possibility of digital integration leading to the demise of many smaller regional and genre fests.

On a further pragmatic level, running a hybrid event is far more demanding than it may appear on the surface, and requires the average festival to increase their staff so as to be able

to manage both the physical section and digital, as well as to invest in both venues and a secure online screening platform—and realistically it makes me distressed to think of the sheer number of festivals I know personally that would not be able to sustain this.

Don't get me wrong, I don't want people to go to a cinema unless they feel safe doing it, but I'm tremendously worried about what the long-term impact of that can come from demanding and expecting consistent integration of virtual public screenings.

That was such a fascinating and comprehensive breakdown. Which festival are you working on next?

I'll once again be working with the Final Girls Berlin Film Festival, which will be doing a virtual edition from February 4th to 7th, 2021! Check it out!

You're repping an indie horror hybrid-documentary called Sator, currently—what can you share about this project?

Sator is wild! It's this incredibly haunting indie from director Jordan Graham who did pretty much everything on the film outside of acting in it, even building a barn for the production. On first glance, it would seem pretty standard—man is in forest, man loses dog, demon starts creeping around, but that's just the surface of it. The wildest part is that Graham wrote the script while taking inspiration from his own life, where multiple members of his family have claimed to have contact with a mysterious demon entity named Sator. The end result borders on documentary, with Graham's late grandmother on screen recounting stories of her experiences with the demon. Fact can be stranger than fiction, and the enthralling story is made all the more breathtaking through truly inspired moody aesthetics.

Sounds fantastic. What's the most exciting thing that you've been able to do in your job?

Well, I've been lucky enough to travel around the globe for film festivals, which has been pretty righteous. Would sneaking into the premiere party for *Under The Silver Lake* at Cannes count? Because that was pretty exciting, even if I realized later on that the movie was not my jam.

Otherwise, it's pretty great when I can help filmmakers reach heights of recognition they didn't otherwise expect they've have with their films, but that's a bit too cheesy to say, I think. Being a film publicist means your life is pretty much a revolving door of festivals and emails.

That's not too cheesy, at all. I think it's wonderful. Are there any bucket list accomplishments you're still working toward?

Career-wise, I still need to go to Sundance! That's a big thing I'm bummed to have not been able to do before I ran into trouble at the border and hit a travel ban to the U.S. Personally, and sorta on the same

wavelength, I want to go on a road-trip across America (post-Covid), except I don't know how to drive and have no plans to learn so I've got a bit more troubleshooting to figure out.

Best of luck! What would you say to other women interested in working in film publicity?

If it fits your timeline, start out at a festival. Even in the PR department, chances are if it's a local or genre festival, there's a lot of contact with the other teams. It's so beneficial to get that insider experience, and it will only help you down the line as you navigate at other festivals and with filmmakers and with your own peers. It also gives you such a great

opportunity to meet film journalists and work with them and get to know them in such a positive setting, and you'll also get to meet so many filmmakers, producers, and talent all in one go. It's just the best way to dive into things, and, if you really give it your all, the connections you make at this stage are going to be with you for your whole career—and, hopefully, in a less cynical tone, some of those friendships will stick with you even longer.

Visit Exile PR at exilepr.com and follow Kaila on twitter @clevergirl.

Explore the Final Girls Berlin Film Festival at finalgirlsberlin.com.

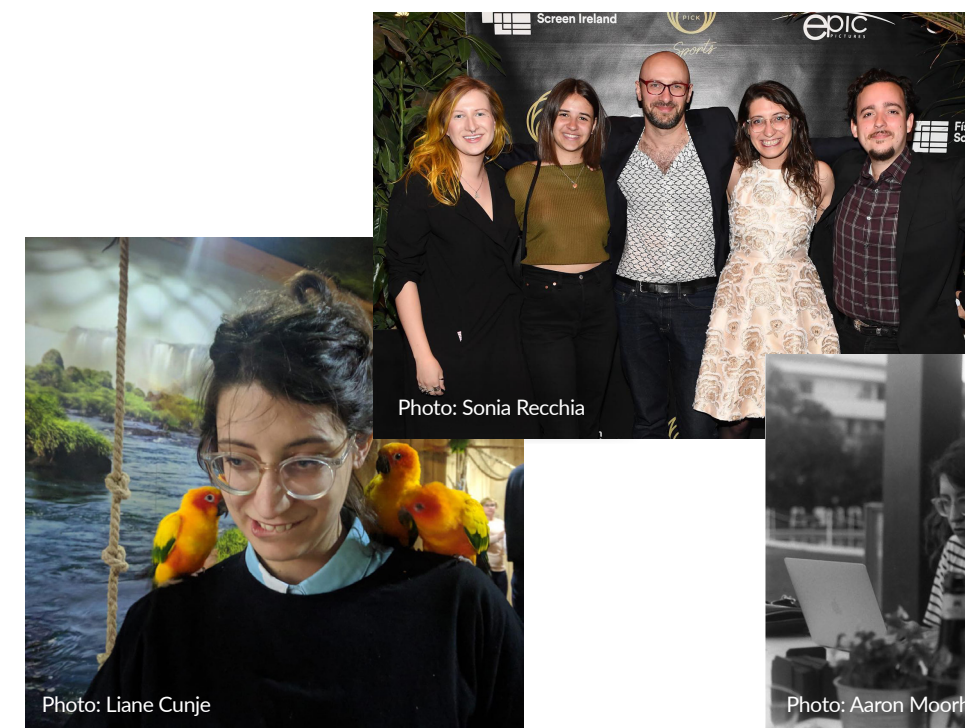


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Inherited Fear: Motherhood & Monstrosity in Hereditary

by Ellen Boyd

Being a mother in horror is hard; you're either trying to cope with the monster that is your child (*The Omen* (Donner, 1976), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), etc.) or you are the monster that everyone is trying to escape (*Aliens* (Scott, 1986), *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), etc.). Either way, motherhood in the horror genre seems to inextricably lend itself to monstrosity. This is a concept that protagonist Annie Graham (Toni Collette) in Ari Aster's film *Hereditary* (2018) tries to grapple with, not only in terms of her mother's monstrosity, but with her own fear of becoming a monster herself.

At her mother's funeral and grief counselling meetings, Annie describes her mother, Ellen Leigh (Kathleen Chalfant), as a stubborn, controlling, and manipulative presence that she is unable to exorcise from her life. Even after Ellen's death, these aspects of her personality are physically represented in the Graham family home that Ellen co-opted just before. Words of a spell carved into the walls, ritual triangles inscribed on the floor, and Ellen's corpse in the attic all continue her influence over the Grahams' lives and home. In a note Ellen left for Annie, the cliché parental advice, "our sacrifices will pale next to the rewards," becomes an inversion of how society believes

parents should act. Instead of sacrificing her needs for her family, Ellen offers up her family as literal human sacrifices to complete her goals of conjuring the Hell-King Paimon. Ellen is monstrous because she uses her family as resources and manipulates them into completing her will, even if it means her family's destruction.

“Annie's compulsive repression of her feelings is literalized through a project to recreate her life in miniature.

The continued influence of her mother within the house is not lost on Annie. Due to her father's and brother's deaths, Annie feels she must minimize her negative emotions towards her mother because of the grief Ellen went through, lest Annie be perceived as insensitive (monstrous). Annie's compulsive repression of her feelings is literalized through a project to recreate her life in miniature. In hand-sculpting her life, Annie gains control over moments in the past where she may have lacked it, such as when Ellen insisted she breastfeed Annie's daughter Charlie (Milly Shapiro). But,

after seeing Ellen's ghost in the studio, Annie turns the sculpture of this very power struggle away from her view. It is clear that Annie still has little control over her mother's actions, nor is she able to face their lingering emotional and psychological repercussions.

However, Annie is more similar to her mother than she would care to admit or realise. Just as her own father and brother blamed Ellen for their psychological distress, Annie feels blamed for putting stress on her family during the months Ellen lived in their house. Even after Ellen's death, Annie continues to believe she is the nexus of her family's stress. We learn that, while sleepwalking, Annie almost set herself, her son Peter (Alex Wolff), and Charlie on fire. Since this incident, Peter harbours feelings of mistrust towards Annie. Annie resents this, and begins to resent Peter, because she cannot reconcile those same feelings she felt towards Ellen being directed at her. After Charlie's death, Annie's expressions of grief increase the feelings of mistrust and resentment from the rest of her family. Trust between Annie and her husband Steve (Gabriel Byrne) breaks down further as she begins to sleep alone in the treehouse, goes out at night without telling anyone, and sculpts the car accident which resulted in Charlie's death. It reaches the point where Steve believes Annie refuses to forgive Peter for the accident. Steve accuses Annie of abandoning her motherly duties towards Peter and spurning him—regardless of what it does to Peter's mental health, this is a monstrous act for a parent to do to a child.

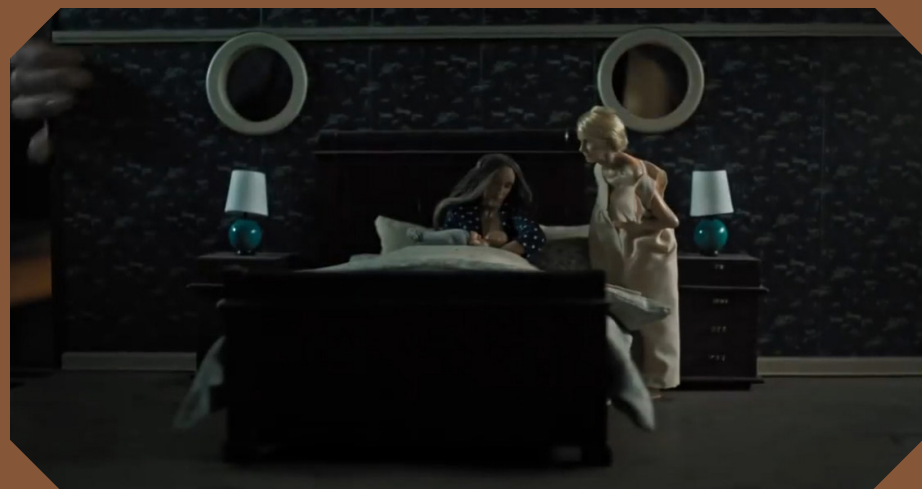
These resentments turn to fear when Annie tries desperately to reconnect with Charlie through séances. Annie's use of witchcraft brings her closer to Ellen, who was the head of her own coven, as well as closer to monstrosity; as a witch she becomes a paradigm of an evil, horrific woman. In Steve's

view, Annie's obsession with Charlie's spirit is not only the manifestation of a hysteric, grief-stricken mind, but a twisted performance to enact some sort of revenge on Peter for the accident. From Peter's perspective, his mother has become a wicked witch, conjuring vengeful ghosts (Charlie/Paimon) to haunt Peter for his role in Charlie's death; this brings him to the point of mental breakdown. Accused and feared by her remaining family, Annie finds herself becoming her worst fear: a source of unhappiness, mistrust, and instability for her family—a reflection of the monster Ellen was to her.

Realising what is happening to her and her family, Annie performs the utmost parental act—she chooses to sacrifice herself to save Peter by destroying Charlie's sketchbook. When Steve is burned instead, Annie is possessed by Paimon, the evil spirit Ellen conjured and transformed into a monstrous mother who destroys the last of her family. This climax happens in the attic, where the two matriarchs of the Leigh/Graham family lose their heads. Headless and robed in white, Annie's corpse becomes identical to Ellen's. Mother and daughter (mother and mother) have become the same; bowing before an altar created through their mutual destruction, but also through their mutual monstrosity.

In the beginning of the film, Peter's English class discusses one of Sophocles' tragic plays about the hero Heracles. The teacher points out that the plot was determined by fate; none of Sophocles's characters had a real choice. When asked if this makes the play more or less tragic, a student responds that it is more tragic because the characters never had any hope to begin with. Another student responds that Heracles's fatal flaw was believing he was in control of his actions when he really wasn't. This statement bodes for the whole film—none of the characters could hope to escape Ellen's insidious designs—but it also speaks to Annie's predicament. Annie thought she could control the monster of her mother, but could not expect the demons that she had inherited to cause the stirrings of a monster within herself; one whose influence would cause Annie to realize that she was more her mother's daughter than she

“Annie thought she could control the monster of her mother, but could not expect the demons that she had inherited to cause the stirrings of a monster within herself...



Hard to Swallow: Digesting Patriarchy & Power in Dumplings

by Danielle Ryan

Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (2004) examines what women will do to maintain a semblance of power within the patriarchy—even if it means sacrificing the most traditionally sacred aspects of their femininity. The film follows Mrs. Li (Miriam Chin Wah Yeung), an aging television actress who suspects her husband is having an affair. To try to look younger and win back her husband's affections, she seeks the help of Aunt Mei (Gong Li), who is known for her famous miracle dumplings. Aunt Mei promises her dumplings can make a woman look younger and feel more vital, thanks to their special ingredient: human fetuses.

Humans have used both placental and fetal tissue for their believed restorative properties for some time. The use of placental tissue (the sac that feeds the fetus *in utero*) has fewer moral implications—you can Google “placenta recipe” if you need proof—but fetal tissue is more internationally taboo. An 2005 investigative report discovered a black-market fetus trade in Ukraine, in which the fetal tissue was being used to make women's beauty products—specifically, ones for anti-aging (Parfitt, 2005).

If the idea of moisturising with those particular cells makes you feel uncomfortable, imagine ingesting them. Understandably, Mrs. Li is horrified at the idea, though her desperation drives her forward. In her first attempt at eating a dumpling, she is so revolted

that she spits it out on the floor. Aunt Mei ends up burying the dumpling in one of her plants so that the flowers might grow better, as she doesn't want to be wasteful. Mei treats the dumplings with reverence, though she clearly doesn't feel any remorse regarding their provenance. Throughout the film, Mei talks about both abortions and fetuses with a kind of twisted glee. Mrs. Li eventually manages to keep one of the dumplings down, and Mei even sings to help her through it.

Despite the film revolving almost entirely around these two women, the desires of men are ever present.

Mrs. Li doesn't get her desired results and spies her husband flirting with a young masseuse. Her previous ethical quandaries are left by the wayside as she demands Mei make her more potent dumplings. Mei agrees but warns her that they might be more expensive due to the difficulty in getting the ingredients. Mrs. Li doesn't care. She wants to be young again: to have her television career, her husband, and all the joys of her youth. “I used to always laugh when I was young,” Mrs. Li laments to Mei while looking at an old picture of herself in her television heyday.

Mrs. Li no longer laughs. She barely even cracks a smile, her severe expression making her look much older than she is. (This is a testament to Yeung's performance as the actress was already much younger than the middle-aged Mrs. Li—she manages to make herself look downright matronly at times.) Mei, by contrast, is an explosion of life and color. She sings and dances and laughs with abandon, getting enjoyment out of every moment of existence. Her vibrance both intimidates and intrigues Mrs. Li, who begins spending more and more time with her.

Despite the film revolving almost entirely around these two women, the desires of men are ever present. The film's true villain, the patriarchal system that gives women power only through sex and reproduction, lurks in nearly every scene. Masculinity is prized and men are to be placated, while femininity is only a means to an end; a way to appease the dominant males. Sex and pregnancy become transactional, a uterus only a vessel and the body that holds it no more than a protective shell.

In the feature-length version of the film (it existed first as a short in the 2004 anthology collection *Three... Extremes*), we are shown this in the most literal sense as Mr. Li chips away at an eggshell to reveal a fully-formed chicken embryo inside. (This is a southeast Asian delicacy called *balut*,

and it is traditionally eaten by pregnant women for the health of their own growing embryo.) He slurps it down while a young masseuse rubs his feet and flirts with him. Mr. Li discards the shell, done with what's inside, much as he discards the women in his life.

Perhaps the most tragic case in the film comes from one of Aunt Mei's patients, a teenage girl who was raped by her father. The girl's mother, too afraid to try to stop the father or go to police, takes the girl to Aunt Mei for an abortion. Despite Aunt Mei's boasts about being able to perform even the most complicated procedures without any bleeding, the girl ends up hemorrhaging to death in her own home later. Mei reveals to Mrs. Li that she did the procedure without any medicine for the girl, only a catheter, in order to prevent Mrs. Li from getting sick eating the dumplings. She also makes sure to point out that the fetus is a boy, and that you wouldn't be able to get one of those where she came from.

Prior to this, Mei seemed to be more altruistic, a woman who helped other women out of bad situations. She came to Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland and tells one of her nurse friends a story about how she did ten abortions a day during the time of the one-child policy. When discussing her time in China with Mrs. Li, Mrs. Li marvels that Mei must have “saved so many lives”.

“I cleansed them,” Mei replies. “We all have fates we can't escape.”

This is horrifying on its own, but even more so within the context of the one-child policy and China's lengthy history of female infanticide. Sons are considered a blessing and daughters an economic burden, thus various cultural and societal norms became skewed to permit families to abandon or kill their daughters in favour of sons. With the enactment of the one-child policy in 1979, many potential parents decided to terminate pregnancies if they weren't going to have a son. Maleness was so prized that mothers were willing to put their daughters to death.

This valued, rare male fetus will allegedly give Mrs. Li the youth she craves. It is also more fully developed, which might have disgusted her before she gave up such petty concerns. After she consumes the dumplings,

she is overwhelmed with arousal, and she gives into her newfound sexual appetites with her husband.

This is where the feature version and short diverge, though each has something to say about the commodification of reproduction and the unattainable quest for youth. In the feature, Mr. Li decides to find out why his wife suddenly has a libido and tracks down Aunt Mei. He eats one of the dumplings, mirroring the *balut* he ate earlier in the film. Aunt Mei tells him exactly what he's eating and he doesn't care one bit, having none of the aversion his wife did initially. Mei and Mr. Li then have violent, passionate sex. Later, when Mrs. Li comes back to Mei for more dumplings, Mei refuses her—because she now desires Mr. Li for herself.

Mr. Li has all the power. Three different women become wrapped around his little finger, while he doesn't seem to be anything particularly special.

In the feature, Mrs. Li finds out that the masseuse with whom her husband was having an affair is pregnant, and convinces the girl to have an abortion and give it to her. She ends up making and consuming dumplings containing her husband's unborn child. In this ending, she is willing to eat the flesh of the woman she believes hurt her the most (she doesn't know about Mei's affair) in order to become attractive to her husband again. She is literally trying to devour the spirit of the younger woman who usurped her husband's affections. Her own identity becomes a memory as she forges ahead in creating a new one—one that will satisfy her husband.

Mr. Li has all the power. Three different women become wrapped around his little finger, while he doesn't seem to be anything particularly special. They simply want to be his, to belong to him and be desired by him. His desire is their greatest goal, erasing whatever their own personal desires might be. Where other films might turn the tables

and remove the power from Mr. Li, that doesn't happen here. In fact, he remains untouched by the madness of the women around him, indulging in it while never letting it affect him in any real way.

This stands in stark contrast to the rapist father, whose wife eventually murders him in a fit of grief after the death of their daughter. Unlike the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. Li, the family who came to Mei for an abortion are not well off economically. They do not need Mei for restorative youth magic, but to restore the perceived purity of a teenage girl. That is, in a way, its own restoration as they have hidden the girl's pregnancy, fearing that it would ruin her chances of finding a good husband.

Finding and keeping a (hopefully good) husband seems to be the only choice for women within this structured patriarchal rule. Motherhood is portrayed as nigh-holy and abortions are shunned despite their regularity. Women are driven to extremes by the men in their lives, risking sanity and their very lives for appearances' sake.

In the short version of the film, it is not the masseuse who gets pregnant, but Mrs. Li herself. It's revealed early on that Mrs. Li has been unable to have children, despite wanting them. Her pregnancy is miraculous, the result of her one passionate night with her husband after eating the special dumplings. She now has what she truly always wanted—a child of her own. However, she has become so fixated on needing her husband's desire that she gives up this dream, too, eating her own child's embryo in the final scene.

Some mothers in the animal kingdom eat their young when they know there's no chance of survival. While it could be argued that Mrs. Li's only maternal instinct was to protect her child thusly, it's much more likely that her vanity outweighed every other emotion. Her world revolved around her husband and fantasies of her youth. She would rather continue trying to revert to maidenhood than become a mother, even if it forced her to become a monster.

The monstrous women of *Dumplings* are each trapped, much like Aunt Mei says, by their “fates”. The teenage girl cannot escape her father, but she also must try to prepare herself to be a wife. Her mother must battle between her



desires to protect her child and retain her marriage, eventually losing out on both. Mrs. Li is trapped in the past, unable to accept that she will continue to age, and that perhaps her husband only ever liked her for her looks. Mei is trapped in a system that outwardly condemns the practice of abortion while secretly promoting it through unreasonable expectations. Mei is a necessary figure, a lifesaver in some ways, but she is reviled by the morally righteous. She is forced to operate in her living room instead of a sterile environment. She is every medicine woman and witch that has ever existed, providing services to women that they can't find elsewhere.

In their book, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power*, author Jude Ellison Sady Doyle posits that in many cultures a uterus is

“a dangerous host for a man's perfect sperm, resulting in story after story in which a bad wife inflicts her own biological corruption on her husband's family line.”

Mrs. Li's inability to conceive was placed entirely at her feet. The teenage girl was burdened with carrying a life inside of her that she did not want, and the shame if she revealed it would be her own. Mei is considered wicked, with even the mother of the incestuous family commenting on her

“black market methods”. None of the women have any agency of their own but are instead shoehorned into the roles that society dictates for them. The only woman with a hint of agency is Aunt Mei, but even she is susceptible to the charms of Mr. Li.

It would be easy to condemn Mei or Mrs. Li as villains. Both are willing to transgress societal norms in order to achieve their goals, and Mrs. Li is willing to sacrifice her personal ethics. Mei is also partially responsible for the death of the teenage mother, though the father should have been the one to take full responsibility to begin with. Instead, *Dumplings* shows us the complexities of their world. Yes, Mrs. Li is vain, but she also doesn't know how to escape her building depression. She doesn't seem to have any friends and her world revolves around her husband, so his lack of attention has left her completely devoid of joy. Mei seems to genuinely believe that she is helping people, providing needed services both to those who need to terminate their pregnancies and those who want to restore their youth. Without the society that demands women be pure, perfect objects of desire, there wouldn't be a need for Aunt Mei's services.


Though *Dumplings* was directed by a man, Fruit Chan, it is worth noting that it was written by a woman, Pik-

Wah Lee, a former Hong Kong actress. Her perspective is evident in the film, as Mei and Mrs. Li's interactions feel genuine and the women's desires are based in our own reality. Ling and Yeung give stellar performances, and Ling deservedly won the Best Supporting Actress award at the Hong Kong Film Awards. The actresses injected the film with their own experiences and perspective, making it into something of a modern horror masterpiece.

While the women of *Dumplings* are certainly monstrous, it is only because they are unable to be themselves within the confines of their patriarchal society. Men must be appeased and other women are seen as competition, rather than comrades. *Dumplings* dissects the relationship between traditional gender roles, capitalism, and vanity, and the transactional nature of reproduction with wit and some truly brilliant moments of horror.

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Famished

by Valeska Griffiths
illustrated by Lily Todorov

They were running out of time.

They knew it, too. Not just because the glowing digits on the clock continued to count upward, inexorably.

It was a deeper knowing, one that seemed to permeate and suffuse the very material of which they were made.

You couldn't call it *flesh*, anymore. Certainly not that.

But whatever it was, it pulsed with urgency.

No. With *hunger*. Let's not mince words.

After all, it had been weeks since their last feeding.

With the entire town in lockdown for nearly a year, it had become almost impossible to entice prey to enter their nondescript lair. Passersby were few and far between, and the few souls who ventured outside of their homes navigated the streets quickly and purposefully, eyes straight ahead, more focused on avoiding potentially infectious contact with fellow humans than on the dubious attractions promised by the now yellowing and peeling posters pasted up on the dingy windows.

They exhaled deeply a breath they hadn't even realized they'd been holding. They were *hungry*, damn it.

But wait.

A lone figure stood across the street, clad in a dark pea coat and yellow tuque. A man, bearded, with slim legs and cheeks attractively reddened by the cold.

They could see him through the narrow spaces between the fading posters. They watched him shiver in the gusts which efficiently ushered the dead leaves from the east end of the street to its western terminus—the dead end which housed their grim feeding grounds.

Perhaps the wind was finally bringing something more interesting than some cast-off tree parts.

The man looked both ways (*how ridiculous*, they thought, *traffic has been nearly non-existent for months*) before moving

across the rain-slick road, his shadow cutting through the gleaming reflections of the too-bright streetlights lining the pavement.

Moving toward their humble home.

Yes...this was interesting.

As the man approached the door, they mustered all of the energy they had left. This had to be a convincing performance. After all, the next potential meal may be days away...

...or even longer.

If not now, then perhaps never.

They concentrated.

They felt an odd tightening as their matter (not flesh, but almost) knitted together, the particles (not cells, but nearly) closing ranks to form a corporeal husk. The husk was generated from memory, imperfect and uncanny, but realistic enough that, by the time the prey was close enough to notice its preternatural charms, they had no hope of escape.

The transformation was completed not a moment too soon; seconds later, the door chimed as the man pulled it open and stepped inside, stopping for a moment to pat down his coat pockets and locate his wallet before walking brusquely forward.

It was time.

They grinned invitingly, taking care to keep any cruelty out of their performatively cheerful expression. Giving the man a slight wave with their left hand, they opened their mouth and silently prayed that their skills of mimicry were not too rusty—they'd always found humans to be the most difficult to impersonate.

The man was less than five feet away, now. Almost within reach.

They could practically taste him already.

"Welcome to Arby's," they purred. "May I take your order?" *g*



INVASION OF THE POD PEOPLE

Horror Podcast Showcase

by Valeska Griffiths

When we're not enjoying spooky things, we're listening to queer folks talk about them! This month, we're spotlighting Mary Beth McAndrew and Terry Mesnard of *Scarred for Life*.

Listen: podbay.fm/p/scarred-for-life

First, full disclosure: I've been a guest on *Scarred for Life* (and had a blast doing it). For readers who haven't had the *Scarred for Life* experience, what's the elevator pitch?



Terry: *Scarred for Life* is basically a nostalgia trip back to the films that scared us as kids. We talk to people in the horror industry and community about a film that terrified them as a child and then look back at the film as adults to see how it holds up!

Mary Beth: I also use it as an excuse to talk to found footage directors so Terry can listen to me gush for extended periods of time.

How did you meet? What led to the launch of the podcast?

T: Mary Beth and I were twitter mutuals for a while and then she submitted an article for my Gayly Dreadful Pride series and we started talking a bit. Then, someone on twitter was discussing a movie that scared them growing up and I half-jokingly said something about how that's a great podcast idea...

MB: Weirdly enough, I had that idea on my own before I had really started in film journalism. I wanted to start my own podcast and interview just people I knew: friends, family, etc. But, as usual, time got in the way and I put it on the back burner. Then I saw Terry's tweet and thought, "Okay, it's a sign, it's time to do this idea." I'm so glad I waited because what we've made is better than anything I could have imagined.

T: It was complete happenstance! We sort of fell into it. And

it's honestly been the most important creative endeavor I've been a part of...mostly because of Mary Beth.

MB: Shut up.

T: It's true!

You're adorable. What would you say are your own top three scarred-for-life early horror experiences?

T: Oh, for me, it's absolutely *Arachnophobia* at the top because it changed the way I approach life. The other two would be *A Nightmare on Elm Street* because it was the first time I saw a horror movie whose intent was to terrify you. The final one, and one I'm hoping we'll discuss on the podcast at some point, is *Alien*.

MB: *Jaws* was my first horror movie and I couldn't even swim in a pool without being terrified. Then there's *Poltergeist*, which I talked about on our first episode. Ghosts have always scared me the most and seeing such an unrelenting representation of a haunting at such a young age was quite a mistake. The last one I'll say is *Willow*, which I really want to talk about some day!

Are there any common threads that you've noticed in the films that people choose to talk about on your show?

T: It seems to be different for each person, but a lot of the unifying threads is that one moment that broke their childhood brain...what do you think, Mary Beth?

MB: This isn't so deep, but VHS covers! I had never thought much about how cover art deeply affected people until it was brought up constantly on the show. I started thinking about

covers that scared me and it was such a cool connection/revelation about what really gets into our heads.

Pretty sure I brought up the *Hellraiser* VHS cover during my episode! *Scarred for Life* is kind of a cool, informal study of the lasting effects of exposure to horror at a young age. Can you draw any conclusions so far?

MB: Fear is more than nightmares. We've talked to guests who have puked after watching movies, who have had existential crises, and one Jessica Rose can't even think about animatronic dinosaurs without panicking. I feel like kinder trauma is talked about at a very surface level, like "Oh my god, that movie scared me, too!" But this podcast has really let us dig into how fear can be both so universal and so deeply personal.

T: Yeah, what she said.

If you each had to pick a favourite episode to recommend to new listeners, which would you choose and why?

T: Hmmm. I think for me it's our episode with Amy Seimetz (*She Dies Tomorrow*/*Pet Sematary*) about *The Gate* because that was a film that surprised me as an adult. And Amy was incredibly funny on the episode and showed off a lot of her dark sense of humor.

MB: God, Terry, we share the same brain. I was going to say that episode, too! Another favourite was our episode with Reyna Cervantes about *The Great Mouse Detective*. One, because we talk about sexy rodents and two, I love when we talk about kids movies that have been terrifying. There's something so validating about hearing how this movie for children haunted someone else's nightmares.

T: Yes! It reminds me that movies don't have to be "horror" to be scary. I'm also incredibly happy with our episode with Nay Bever and *The People Under the Stairs* because that was a film that not enough people talk about and Nay is amazing.



Terry Mesnard



Mary Beth McAndrews

MB: She is so smart and it's a great example of how deep we go into film analysis.

Apart from horror, what else can we find in your Netflix lists?

MB: *Ink Master* is now on Netflix. I love a good competition show and this one has tattoos. I also really enjoy anime, so I've been watching the *Berserk* movies and catching up with new releases like *Beastars*.

T: Right now I'm working my way through *Bridgerton*, which is a pulpy treat. And you'd find a lot of baking shows/competitions like *The Great British Baking Show* and *Nailed It!*


What advice would you give to readers wanting to start their own podcasts?

T. Commit. It's a marathon, not a sprint and that's something I still have to remind myself. Also, invest in a good mic and as much as people typically buy a Yeti...if you're starting out, don't.

MB: Exactly. You need endurance for this to work. You also need really good communication with your partner. Without it, you can easily get frustrated or take on more work. But if you have straight forward conversations and set expectations up front, it makes a world of difference for both your show and your partnership.

You both have some amazing stuff going on apart from the podcast, want to briefly tell our readers where else they can find your work?

T: I own Gayly Dreadful, a site devoted to promoting LGBTQ+ voices in horror. I also edit the e-magazine *We Are Horror* which is all about lifting up unique voices in horror.

MB: I write about horror all over the Internet and I'm an editor for Film Cred, a site all about giving new writers a voice and platform. You can find a lot of my work on Film School Rejects, Daily Grindhouse, and Paste. 

Named for a popular cosmetic adhesive, Spirit Gum explores the intersection of horror and beauty. Painterly people often go from well-shaped lips to well-placed blood drips. Here, we examine those of us who are always red-handed!

What Lies Beneath: Unmasking Orphan

Makeup application scenes often act as a metaphor for the application of war paint and invite us to share an intimate moment with a character as they get ready for a fight, coating themselves in pigment to brace for what's to come. In *Promising Young Woman* (2020), Cassie (Carey Mulligan) is seen following a tutorial for perfect "blowjob lips," before smearing her lipstick as she gets ready to fake inebriation and prey on a Nice Guy. In *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) lays on gorgeous layers of rouge to prepare herself to murder the *führer* and his closest advisors. But in *Orphan* (2009), for Leena (Isabelle Fuhrman) to drop her gloves, she must rub her makeup off.

Leena wears many masks. Before landing herself in an American orphanage, she fooled families by disguising herself as a young girl. Her history of tricking adoptive parents into thinking she is a child, attempting to seduce the father figure, and murdering them all upon failing, lands her in a mental hospital. Escaping her asylum and landing in America, Leena is free to carry out her *modus operandi* once more, disguising herself as a girl named Esther and being selected for adoption by the Coleman family.

She meets the Colemans while she is



dressed as Esther and impresses them with her maturity. Her paintings and musical ability seem beyond her years, but she's just a little girl as evidenced to them by her hair ribbons and loose-fitting dresses. Her very survival relies on her mask of dentures and bows, a mask she is eager to remove in order to seduce John (Peter Sarsgaard), her adoptive father.

Leena thinks she is going to war when she dresses to beguile John, layering on thick black eyeliner and red lipstick. In her moment, she gleefully cuts fabric from her dress, hoping to show more skin and appear more adult. Having removed John's wife, Kate (Vera Farmiga), from the home, she has him to herself and is ready to pounce

and fulfil her desires. Prepared and eager, she makes her move on John, who glances at the makeup she's so carefully applied and asks, "what have you done to your face?"

The rejection of her work to make herself desirable triggers Leena's dissent into her ravenous rage. She retreats to her room and removes her mask. Black smears drip down her face, the pigment having latched onto her flood of tears. Looking in the mirror, she takes in the version of herself she's cultivated, removes her ribbons and false teeth, then smears a cotton pad across her face to messily wash away the black liner. Then, she blasts into a bout of unbound violence.

Leena's entire being is about masking who she is. From disguising herself as a child with the paint of youth, to presenting herself as a mature sexual object, Leena hid herself under a slick veneer. For Leena, going to war meant removing her masks, messily spreading kohl across her skin in ways that highlighted her age lines. Leena tries desperately to apply her war paint at every venture, but when her attempts fail her, it's the removal of her makeup that sends the true Leena to battle. *g*



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THE HAUNTED LIBRARY

by Zack Long



DEVIL'S ADVOCATES

The Devil's Advocates series

Various authors

Auteur Publishing, 2011-present

Auteur Publishing is easily one of my favourite publishing companies in the realm of film studies, and they have been putting out amazing books for years. Many of these are detailed studies of a particular subgenre, such as the delightfully detailed *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* by Adam Scovell; the amount of attention that goes into these tomes is impossible to ignore.

But even more interesting is their *Devil's Advocates* series.

As a series, the only thing that truly links these books is their focus on horror. That, and their size. Each *Devil's Advocates* book is about 120 pages long; technically, they are monographs rather than books. The series began in 2011 with *Let the Right One In* and *Witchfinder General*, written by Anne Billson and Ian Cooper, respectively. Since then, they have put out about another forty volumes. I first discovered this series when I stumbled upon Amy Simmonds' insightful volume on *Antichrist* and I have since gone on to read a dozen more.

Each book has proven interesting for its own reason, as each writer is given the chance to approach their film from the angle most fascinating to them. For example, Marcus K. Hermes' *The Curse of Frankenstein* and Jez Conolly & David Bates' *Dead of Night* concentrate primarily on the production of the films in question, while Michael Blyth's *In the Mouth of Madness* instead focuses on how to best locate Carpenter's film within

the canon of horror as a whole. Having such a large scope of possible discussions can be both a positive and a negative, depending on what you are looking for out of a particular volume. While it creates more uncertainty as to what approach an author will take, it certainly helps to prevent it from getting boring. The short size helps with this as well, since even the least impressive volume only takes an hour to read.

As for the books in the series, I believe that several may be particularly of interest to *Grim* readers: *Suspiria* by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas; *M* by Samm Deighan; *Daughters of Darkness* by Kat Ellinger; *Antichrist* by Amy Simmonds; *Candyman* by Jon Towlson; and *The Fly* by Emma Westwood. To say these are just a few of the titles is an understatement. Regardless of which subgenre of horror you like best, there's something for everyone, and each book includes a bibliography that can point you towards additional resources worth collecting. Oh, and if you're looking for a similar resource for science fiction films, Auteur Publishing does a sister-series called *Constellations*.

So, check out Auteur Publishing and give them some love—and especially take a dive into the *Devil's Advocates* series. Chances are, they've already covered at least a couple of films that you love. *g*

Dear Countess

The Countess is a certified Gothic therapist, an interior decorator with a soft spot for spooky, and a 6000-year-old Vampire-Canadian with more opinions than she knows what to do with. In each issue of *Grim*, her advice column tackles timeless dilemmas and dishes out practical solutions.

My neighbours are starting to complain about the smell in my backyard. How is a girl supposed to live her necromantic life?

As someone whose...shall we say 'quirks' have garnered the attention and ire of more than a couple of neighbours in the past, I cannot over-emphasize the importance of maintaining cordial neighbour relations.

That being said, I also believe that it is important to feel comfortable expressing yourself while on your own property!

If I were you, I would invest in some fragrant herb bundles to hang around your fence. That way, you can continue to raise the dead and your neighbours can enjoy some pleasant aromatherapy! Perhaps lavender and mint? Or a delicate assortment of ripe vanilla pods?

My cenobite roommate keeps stealing my needles when I need them to mend my socks. How do I address this?

Roommate problems are always so tricky, aren't they? You swallow your resentment, and it winds up festering. You confront them in the wrong way, and you end up feeling awkward in your own creepy lair. It takes the perfect balance of tact and firmness to solve most roommate dilemmas.

But, in this case, we are talking about a cenobite.

A cenobite will not respond to reasonable entreaties to "do the right thing" or "stop being a jerk, Phillip." Rather, you must fight fire with fire. If your hellraising roommate steals your needles, simply return the favour by swiping their latex onesie or drinking the last of their goat milk. They'll get the message soon enough.

Have a question for the Countess? Need advice about the spookier side of life? Submit your queries via the contact form at anatomyofascream.com.

CLASSIFIEDS

Commercial & Residential Real Estate

AVAILABLE IMMEDIATELY: 1-room bachelor rent-free in an electrified slab of meat. Spacious but rather damp. Renter must pay damage deposit to my therapist and be an insipid thought that will slowly and inevitably drive me mad. Last tenant was the theme song to The Munsters and was loud but very respectful. References are always a plus. If interested, please contact Charlie: (666) 781-1844.

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Accomplished spectre offering pro residential haunting. Can provide references from past clients. Just whisper "Yul" into a closet to summon me.

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Are you a parasite throwing a dinner party? Willing to host a family of 1000 or fewer for as many days as I have left. Enzo: (666) 427-4831.

Crime scene clean-up needed! Timing of crimes negotiable. Call Priyanka or Lita: (666) 455-8123. Rates still v fair!!

Jobs

Lonely woman looking to hire experienced ghost to haunt me on part-time or as-needed basis. Willing to negotiate base salary and some, errr, benefits. IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. Text Valentina: (666) 803-4932.

Buying & Selling

Looking to offload two glowing ancient books. The words inside are in a dialect that is not of this earth, but they can double as nightlights. Text Jesi (666) 732-2504.

LOOKING TO BUY! Do you own a 1958, four-door, red Plymouth Fury? Willing to pay BIG. Contact Arnie (666) 737-1141.

Romantic Encounters



Look, I'm really not that bad. Yes, I know you've had bad experiences with me before. Team meetings that should have been an email. Weird e-séances gone wrong that killed all your friends. But come on...at least I'm easy to use? Give me a chance! :(

Humans for Humans

Demi for Demi: I saw you from across the room in the shield I was carrying. You played with your hair and they hissed at me. Your smouldering stare stopped me dead in my tracks. Looking to rekindle our connection—ideally without losing our heads, if at all possible. Please call me? Percy (666) 667-6253.

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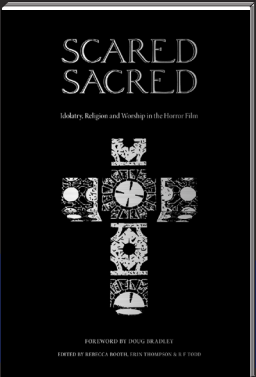
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“Every once in a while, I encounter a book, or even the rumor of one, that feels like it was written just for me: *Scared Sacred: Idolatry, Religion and Worship in the Horror Film*, an anthology of critical essays published by House of Leaves Publishing, more than lives up to the beautiful promise of its name. [...] With my previous book reviews, I tried to exercise some kind of professional restraint in expressing my enthusiasm for a particular work, but I’ll make no such pretenses here: So far, *Scared Sacred* is very much the book I wish I’d had when I was first getting into horror a few years ago. We are perpetually haunted by old symbols and old ideas, and this book is a beautiful reminder of that.”

- Laura Kemmerer, *What Sleeps Beneath*



Scared Sacred: Idolatry, Religion and Worship in the Horror Film

Edited by Rebecca Booth, Valeska Griffiths, and Erin Thompson. Curated by RF Todd.

Foreword by Doug Bradley.

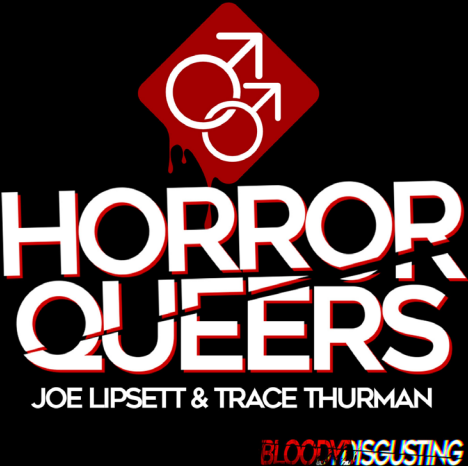
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