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A Stranger at Home

THE DEPICTION OF UNCANNY CHILDREN IN AMERICAN
HORROR CINEMA 1956-1980

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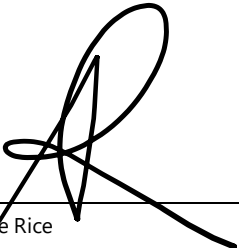
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STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY/ DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

X 

Aoibhe Rice

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the depiction of evil children in American horror films, between the years of 1956 to 1980. It will focus on 3 case studies, *The Bad Seed* (1956), *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Shining* (1980). By looking at how the cultural and historical factors impacted American society, this dissertation explores how the children in these films are formed through the prevailing fears of American society and used as a tool for social critique. Working with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny, what makes these children unsettling and thus, why they are so effective in representing American fears on screen will be examined.

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Introduction

The presence of the child in horror film has become prominent trope in recent years, and their close link with the diabolical and supernatural has always intrigued me. I want to delve into what makes the child character such an effective vehicle for horror, and why they leave such a lasting effect on the audience.

Although the “creepy” or “evil” child transcends all forms of media including literature, theatre, and television, with this dissertation I intend to explore where the figure of the evil child in cinema comes from, and how the trope in the horror genre has developed into its current form. I will be focusing my research on American cinema, from the trope’s inception in the 1950’s, until 1980. To gain better understanding into what makes the image of a child unsettling, I will be approaching the topic through an understanding of the cultural climate and prevalent fears in America during the period in which the films are released. I will be viewing the child itself through the psychoanalytical lens of the “uncanny” as a way of understanding why they are so effective.

The evolution of the trope has interesting correlations with developments and important historic moments in American society. The years following the second world war saw an exponential growth in wealth, and in the numbers of births in America, and in a newly child centred modern world, parents had to tackle both figuring out living in a newly modernised society, and how to raise their child in one (Reeves, 1945, pp. 73-76). The developing Capitalism was selling the American dream as it pushed images of perfect families onto the newly invented tv sets and advertisements and suddenly parents had to deal with an equally shiny new fear: What if I raise my child wrong? And along came Rhoda. *The Bad Seed* brought to popular culture the image of the evil child which had been existing on its fringes for a few decades, with earlier iterations including Miles and Flora appearing in Henry James’s 1898 novel *The Turn of the Screw*. Over the next 3 decades, the US experienced turbulent years with threat of the Cold War and enlistments for the Vietnam War, a disillusionment with the government and various civil rights movements (Hawthornthwaite, 2009). This can be reflected in the depiction of children in horror. The possessed child narrative takes form in the 60’s and 70’s with *Village of the Damned* (1960) and *The Exorcist* being released, alongside other demonic children in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967) and *The Omen* (1976). *The Shining* in 1980 demonstrates the awareness of the child to the crumbling state of the society.

More modern examples include *The Ring* (2002), which engages with technological anxieties, and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), which documents the titular character, Kevin’s aggression and violence towards his mother which eventually accumulates in a school shooting, a very alarming

phenomenon in America. Most recently, *M3GAN* (2023) portrays an AI girl who loses all regard for human life as her primary companion becomes more addicted to her. Although these examples reach beyond the timeline of this dissertation, the influence of the societal environment and parental fears still influence the depiction of children in film.

The term evil in this paper follows Karren J. Renner's term she defines in her book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*; evil is a "metaphysical principle" and so engages with "the supernatural or supernormal world" (Renner, 2016, pp. 6, 13). To use evil as a blanket term does not effectively cover the diversity in which the children discussed, engage with evil. Regan in *The Exorcist* is not an evil child, she is possessed by an evil force beyond her control, and although he interacts with the supernatural, Danny in *The Shining* is a bystander to the evil happenings at the Overlook Hotel, he only witnesses it through his ability to "shine".

Chapter 1 will be exploring the first incarnation of an evil child on the American big screen, in *The Bad Seed*. Rhoda is painted to be the image of the perfect little girl. She is from a good middle class family; her father is a general in the army, while her mother is incredibly doting. They live in a quiet neighbourhood where everyone knows everyone. Rhoda herself is all manners, the poster child for what a good white girl should be. The film is dressed as a melodrama as was popular at the time, however this façade is very quickly eroded when we discover Rhoda is a cold-blooded killer. This chapter will examine in depth the effects of the economic and baby boom America experienced during the post war years, and how they shaped American Suburbia, changed expectations of motherhood and the white middle class fears of the crime ridden poor inner cities from which they had moved from. It will also visit the impact of capitalism on the power children had in the home, through advertising and television. This chapter will also explore Rhoda's interactions with the psychoanalytic theory of the uncanny through her visuals versus her actions. It will also briefly examine suburbia as an uncanny space, in which she inhabits.

Chapter 2 will focus on the possessed child narrative in *The Exorcist*. The film documents the progression of young Regan's demonic possession, from her initial visits to the doctor for mental health treatment until her violent exorcism in the final act. The chapter will examine the degradation of America's Golden Age to a period of social unrest and disillusionment throughout the 60's, due to war, and the influx of new ways of thinking brought in by "new" religions from immigrants to developments in science. The chapter will explore how the film deals with the issue of science and religion, and how Regan's possession could be a reflection on what was viewed to be the corrosion of America due to the new ways of thinking. This chapter will also examine Regan's link with the uncanny,

using Barbra Creed's discussion of Monstrous Femininity and also examining Regan's diabolical "double".

Finally, chapter 3 will delve into arguably one of the most iconic depictions of the uncanny child in *The Shining*. Danny pays witness to the deterioration of his father during their time as caretakers at the Overlook Hotel, while navigating his way through the supernatural entities and visions which confront him, due to his ability to shine. The chapter will examine the Torrance family as an allegory for the deterioration of American culture up until the 1980s through the crumbling nuclear family. It will also examine Jack's patriarchal abuse. Out of all three of the children discussed, Danny's character is more deeply in tune with the uncanny. This will be explored through his inversion of various versions of previous evil children, his ability to shine being an extension of the adult psyche and the uncanny "double" of Tony through how he interacts with Lacan's mirror theory.

The Theory of the Uncanny

The modern image of childhood can be traced back to the Enlightenment and to the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. He describes the child as being a blank sheet, the natural conditions of childhood being naïve and innocent. He encourages us to not judge children as being good or evil, as "[childhood] is the sleep of reason" and what is good or bad must be explored and taught to the child by nature and by interacting with the world (Rousseau, 1979, p. Book 1). Through this, the child gains reason and knowledge, and childhood beliefs get buried beneath adult thought and join the subconscious. Romantic poet Wordsworth completes the image of childhood. Through his work, he explored the nostalgia of childhood, which he believed was the most important time in a person's life. And so, the child became the image on which adults could cast their sentimental fanaticise and longings of nostalgia upon (Blackmore, 2015). The combination of Rousseau's interpretation of the child's unbound conscience and Wordsworth's idealised image of childhood became the building block on which the theory of the uncanny was developed.

In his 1906 paper *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*, Ernst Jentsch explores what exactly is the uncanny and why it is experienced. He introduces us to the *Unheimlich*, a German word that translates to "unhomely", but lacks any direct English meaning, the closest of which it can relate to is the disturbing feeling of the uncanny. In trying to define the feeling of the uncanny, he writes:

"Without a doubt, this work appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him." (Jentsch, 2008, p. 2)

Jentsch focused on the response on seeing something, such as a puppet or wax figure, which has the likeness of something living and having doubts as to whether they are, in fact, animate or inanimate.

Sigmund Freud, in his 1919 essay *Uncanny*, goes on to develop Jentsch's description, saying that the uncanny is not just what is unfamiliar, but that the situation, environment, or events are completely "*familiar, or old established*" but there is something in that situation that makes one uncertain or ill at ease (DeRose & Ruers, 2021). It is in these moments where the irrational fears, which adult reason has blocked away, slip through, leaving a feeling of something "alien" (Freud, 1917, p. 124). In his exploration of the "*Unheimlich*" Freud sets out to understand its opposite, the "*Heimlich*" or the homely, by looking at his history and definitions in other languages, as it is a uniquely German word with no direct translation. He concludes with the paradoxical idea that the Heimlich is identical to its opposite, that there is always the unhomely in the home and "*begs the question, is there any place that makes us feel at home?*" (Freud, 1917, p. 155)

Horror is often used as a catharsis, as it is the vehicle through which we can experience these repressed urges and our child's irrational self in a secure environment. Catharsis was a term coined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle which meant the "purification" or purging of intense emotions through experiences in the dramatic arts. The term was then adopted by psychologists in the 20th century, such as Freud, and was used to describe the sudden outburst of emotion (for example, crying) as a response to underlying stresses, anxieties, and unresolved traumas. (Greene, 2022)

However, as horror speaks to the forgotten and repressed realm of the unconscious mind, it is also the medium that targets our fears and anxieties which we would much rather ignore and forces us to confront unpleasant truths. The presentation of a child, a universal symbol of purity and innocence, through the lens of horror corrupting them into a doorway for evil we are forced to confront the repressed thoughts which challenge us on what we would much rather be blissfully ignorant to (Balanzategui, 2018, p. 10). This corruption takes place through an interaction with an exterior force, or something that has its roots in the child's very nature.

The example of the child in American film can confront the contemporary mindset and norms, whereas films like *The Bad Seed* (1956) can become cautionary tales to an emerging middle class. The story of a "proper little southern white girl" (Jackson, 2000, p. 69) who appears to be the perfect little lady, while beneath her model exterior she is driven by cruel narcissism and will kill to get her hands on what she believes is hers, and will happily dispose of anyone who stands in her way, was made to disrupt and shock audiences. Casting an actress with such "white" features in the role, rather than an actress of a darker complexion, was done with this intention. Rhoda can be viewed as an allegory for

white supremacy ideals, while her actions warp the image of the good white girl those with such views would have as race, or wealth, does not dictate how good or evil someone is. Freud discusses the uncanny being a hidden core to a story or dialogue in media, that we recognise something amiss or not quite right when presented in realism. The cautionary tale of bad parenting is not explicitly pointed out in *The Bad Seed*, but its implications beneath the surface as we see Rhoda get brattier and commit more crimes to target the mounting anxieties of that audience.

Freud discusses the double, or doppelgänger which Otto Rank first mentions in 1914. Freud says the double is an “immortal soul” which denies the powers of death and is the opposition between good and evil. It is something which is birthed from the child’s psyche early on in their development, and thus its reappearance later evokes an uncanny feeling of superstition such as involuntary repetition of the likes of numbers, in shadows, in mirrors, a shared psyche or conscience, and ghosts (DeRose & Ruers, 2021). The result of their resurgence induces a feeling of boundlessness, such as that which you experience in dreams. Regan in *The Exorcist* is a girl forced to enter an alternate state of consciousness due to her possession. She embodies the image of childhood Wordsworth and Rousseau created. Regan is a young girl, an “empty vessel” that has become filled with the knowledge of evil thus entering a shared conscience with the demon who possesses her and becomes the battleground for God versus the Devil (Schober, 2004, pp. 71,2,3). This film came at a pivotal time in American society as there was a rise in changing social ideals.

The Shining embodies the meaning of the uncanny with several layers of it surrounding Danny. The double is a reoccurring uncanny motif in *The Shining*; childhood otherness illustrated by his ability to “shine”, which becomes important in the psychic link between Danny and Jack as it becomes a bridge between the child and adult psyche, his encounters with the supernatural elements of the Overlook Hotel, the presence of Tony his imaginary double, and also the reflection the Torrance family has with the previous winter caretakers, The Grady’s, who were murdered by their father. The child’s relationship to their parents is imperative here due to the deterioration of the state of the nuclear family in America, and the place the child now holds in society.

Understanding the different aspects that create the uncanny and how they apply to the case studies which the following chapters will discuss, we can begin to breakdown why using children in horror as social critique is so effective, and why they remain such haunting figures in film.

Chapter 1- The First Seed

The first iteration of an evil child in American Cinema sparked from parents fear of raising a broken child

Social Climate of the post war years (1950s)

Mervyn Leroy's 1956 film *The Bad Seed* came at a pivotal time in America's social history. The country was finally beginning to experience "boom" times after the second world war and the image of the American dream was reaching its crescendo. A general joyful mood permeated American life as due to the growth in white-collar jobs, many experienced a great improvement in quality of life since they were able to make more money. With over 11 million people getting married between 1945 and 1950 (Sally C. Curtin M.A., 2020), the suburbs expanded to accommodate the influx of new families. According to the Population Reference Bureau, 76 million children were born in the US between 1945 and 1964 (Kelvin Pollard, 2014). The 1950s saw the home become the focal point of family life. Motherhood began to take a new form as the child became the centre of the household with the release of Doctor Benjamin Spock's book "The Common-sense Book of Child and Baby Care" in 1945. He suggested that parents (although he almost exclusively meant mothers) should relax and have fun with their children, trust their instincts and to show affection towards their children (Spock, 1946). This was big diversion from the rigid forms of parenting of the early 20th century, where behavioural psychologists such as JB Watson strongly discouraged physical affection, such as kissing or cradling the child, as too much would lead to overcoddling, which would lead to the child becoming spoiled and self-indulgent (Watson, 1928, pp. 64-78).

New parents who grew up through the depression and Second World War sought to make sure their children would not experience the hardships they had and embraced the comforts this new age was bringing. As a result, the modern age of consumerism began to take hold and become a way of life. Factories pumped out commodities to satisfy this new appetite, as feel-good advertising encouraged an idealised home life. A new child-focused market had now opened with children becoming influential forces in family decision-making, in what advertising executive Rosser Reeves described as a "ferocious man-eating tiger" (Halberstam, 1993, pp. 6, ch 33)

American Suburbia was flourishing during the 1950s, with the idyllic landscape carefully arranged with white picket fenced gardens enclosing manicured lawns that led into carefully curated houses. The homogeneity among residents creates an atmosphere of safety and peace, as they coexist with many

similarities- similar jobs and pay brackets, similar ages, and of course, similar complexion. The suburbs, iconic to the American Dream, were predominantly white middle to upper-middle class (Smicek, 2014, pp. 7-10). What many chose to forget about in the new suburbia were the inner cities that they had left behind, which without the money from these wealthier citizens, were in a steady decline. They became places synonymous with crime and rising levels of juvenile delinquency. These poorer areas were typically majority immigrant and black populations (Hawksworth, 2009). Some began to get anxious that violent crime would spill out into the peaceful suburbs. Teenage culture began to develop adjacent to this with young people beginning to test and push against previously strict, traditional social norms, causing increasing fears of uncontrollable youth.

Film Summary

This is where *The Bad Seed* comes into play. As previously stated in the introduction, children had occasionally appeared as unsettling figures in horror fiction novels, such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. However, this is the first time the figure of the evil child had appeared on screen in America. Portrayal of children previously depicted them as angels, as in Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) and any number of films starring starlet Shirley Temple, or victims, like the children preyed upon in Fritz Lang's *M* (M, 1931).



i THE TRAMP AND THE KID, THE KID 1921



ii ELSIE STALKED BY HANS BECKERT, M 1931

The Bad Seed, initially intended as a drama, has edged its way into the horror genre thanks to the crimes of Rhoda Penmark (played by Patty McCormack). It became a cautionary tale to parents raising children in this time of social change and renewal. The horror genre acts as the ideal vehicle for social critique and delivers the chance to tip the perfect American suburbia into an uncanny hellscape. *The Bad Seed* does this as it sets up the pristine image of a respectable family, the hardworking military father Col. Kenneth Penmark (played by William Hopper), the devoted wife and mother Christine (played by Nancy Kelly), and their eight-year-old daughter Rhoda.

The film is initially presented as a family melodrama, with Rhoda's father away at work while her doting mother stays at home to mind her. Rhoda herself is a clever girl who is doing well at school but has issues getting along with her peers. She comes across to the adults in her life as the perfect little girl, all good manners and smiles, and the very model for a white middle-class young girl, with their neighbour Monica at the beginning of the film saying that she wishes such a girl were hers. Aside from some bratty tendencies, the audience is led to believe this too. Early on, Rhoda comes home from school angry that a boy in her class, Claude, had won a writing award that she was convinced she deserved and will not be told otherwise. This boy is soon found drowned after the class has a day out at the park and Rhoda is suddenly found in possession of his medal. After Christine sits her down and asks how she ended up with the medal, Rhoda gaslights her mother that she was nowhere near this boy, she is a good girl and there could never have been any foul play from her end, simply her teacher does not like her, nor do her classmates and they want to see her get in trouble. Rhoda's magpie tendencies are slowly revealed as the film develops as Rhoda establishes a pattern of collecting trinkets and subsequently leaving a trail of bodies in her wake. Christine finds these in Rhoda's "treasure box", some of which were items promised to her by an unnamed lady who said she would leave them to Rhoda in her will. Rhoda feels as though she is entitled to what she is being promised (or advertised) and seeks to take them immediately. This woman and her dog were found dead at the bottom of a stairway, sometime before the film takes place. Those who are suspicious of Rhoda, like the gardener Leroy who won't fall for Rhoda's perfect façade. He teases Rhoda that she cannot

rid herself of the guilt of the murder, and that he has the murder weapon (her steel heeled shoes). In her fury with Leroy, she traps him in the boiler house and sets it on fire, killing him.



iii RHODA ADMIRES HER TRINKETS AS LEROY WATCHES, THE BAD SEED 1956

As the film progresses Christine, who we learn was adopted, engages in a discussion with Reggie Tasker and her father about the psychology of murderers and the theory of nature versus nurture in how one could be compelled to commit such crimes. As the events of the film reach a crescendo, she discovers that her mother is the famed serial killer that was discussed in the first act of the film, Bessie Denker. Distraught that she possessed the “bad seed” that has warped her child, Christine drugs Rhoda with sleeping pills and goes to her room to shoot herself. In a twist, both survive the attempted murder/suicide as the gunshot alerted the neighbours who were able to get them to the hospital on time. That is, until Rhoda decided to leave her house one night after returning home to fetch the medal that Christine threw into the lake. As someone of such evil cannot get away free with her crimes, in the final moments of the film, Rhoda is struck by lightning and killed as if by some divine intervention.

This intervention is less from a divine power however, than from the Motion Picture Production Code. The original ending of *The Bad Seed* both in the novel and on stage had Rhoda survive being drugged while Christine completed suicide. The production code, introduced in 1930, stated that “Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation”, and that films with child criminality should not “incite demoralising imitation on the part of youth” (H.Hays, 1930). Rhoda could not be left unpunished as it was against the code, so the deaths of Christine and Rhoda were flipped with Rhoda being killed in the only acceptable death for a child on screen, at the hands of God.



iv RHODA IS STRUCK BY LIGHTNING IN THE FINAL SCENE, *THE BAD SEED* 1956

Social critique

Viewing *The Bad Seed* through the lens of social critique, we can examine Rhoda’s actions as extreme reactions to the sudden attention children are receiving from advertising agencies. Rhoda cannot seem to understand patience, or that something mentioned in passing does not equate to her deserving it. When her mother confronts Rhoda on her suspicions that she killed Claude, Rhoda caves and she shows no remorse, just frustration that no one seems to understand that the medal was hers, shouting “He wouldn’t give me the medal, so I had to hit him”. Any prior praise given to her by any of her doting adults simply cemented the fact that she, and she alone deserved the award. The film taps into the uncanny valley of the “childness” mindset where children transgress the lines of societal constraints of the acceptable ways of acting in the rational adult world and bizarre logic of childhood (Bledstein, 2015, p. 151). Through this, Rhoda is the extreme warning of the risks children are being exposed to through the new forms of advertising, particularly on television. They are being promised all kinds of goods, and the power of the young consumer market has been proven. For example, the success of targeting children to encourage parents that buying a television set is essential to the family home (only 9% of homes having a set in 1950 to over 87% towards the end of the decade) (Sterling C., 1990, p. 355) The New Age was bringing a lot of unprecedented change, and so a growing anxiety around children, and raising them correctly, was beginning to permeate through the middle-class landscape.

Throughout the 1950s, print media and radio news reads were full of headlines reporting, with increasing frequency, horrifying cases of crimes committed by young people. The public, naturally, was growing nervous and polls from the middle of the decade suggested most Americans considered it to be a serious social issue (Barnosky, 2006). The FBI also reported a fast rise in arrests made on under-18-year-olds, with their Uniform Crime Report in 1959 stating a 220% rise in youth crime from 1941 to 1957. The report linked this rise in juvenile delinquency with the baby boom “By directly comparing percentages of the rise in delinquency to the rise in the young population, we find juvenile arrests have increased two- and one-half times as fast” (Justice, 1960)) . These figures of rising juvenile criminality included middle class communities. This came down largely due to boredom and was shaking the beliefs of suburban safety families had once taken comfort in. (Smicek, 2014, p. 20))

Rhoda and the Uncanny

What makes Rhoda such a shocking character, is her relationship to the uncanny. While *The Bad Seed's* use of the uncanny may lack the complexity of the two other case studies, Rhoda's relationship to it is just as effective and shocking. Most notably is that she is a young, sweet girl surrounded by respectable adults, yet she is evil incarnate. Her embodiment of the era's white feminine ideal exterior completely at odds with her true dark interior and murderous rage. She is a perfect example of Freud's *unheimlich* (Freud, 1917, p. 134). She disrupts the old established stereotype of young girls: instead of being passive and naïve, she is confrontational, disobedient, and aggressive, typically masculine stereotypes. This would have been an alarming depiction of a girl at a time when children were the catalyst for the change in American society. The figure has been flipped again to produce an unpredicted monster, and one presented in a melodrama type environment, making her very difficult to ignore.

By understanding the social mindset at the time of its release, we can see that this film does a great job of presenting the repressed anxieties of the time, especially among these new parents. Why would crime and the horrors of this film exist in such decent, upstanding places, when they belong to the impoverished inner city and disreputable slums? Because human nature transcends any idea of race or money. Children act on a plane beyond the learned adult morals and reason, and Rhoda is acting upon the childish narcissism that Freud introduced in the uncanny. What makes this film an effective cautionary drama, is that it targets the repressed fear parents have of their children being beyond their control and acting aside from their guidance and protection. The issues of poverty that many living the consumerist dream have chosen to ignore are placed in the centre of their suburbia in *The Bad Seed*, with this image of the perfect white put-together young girl being a driving force for

chaos, murder, and deceit in what should be the picture book neighbourhood- a rather shocking juxtaposition to the prevailing mindset at the time.

Lewis Mumford said that the “suburbs served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion” as human nature is not of those depicted in popular sitcoms and melodramas at the time (Mumford, 1961, p. 494). Humans are by nature messy and unpredictable, and within manicured neighbourhoods there is always a darkness behind each door, be it domestic or public crime- the unheimlich will always be present whenever anyone calls home. Rhoda is the disruptive force in the world of the Penmark family. Her inversion of the “perfect” girl is a tool for introspection for parents at the time. Framed as a cautionary tale for what could be, when crime among youth was a real problem that was ignored by those who felt it did not affect them. That problem is much harder to ignore when it is dressed up like a doll in petticoats and pigtails. Rhoda and her relationship to the uncanny allows for this introspection, in a time when ignorance was bliss and most preferred to live in their illusion.

Much like the evil of Rhoda hidden within the facade of the perfect child, this film masquerades as the familiar domestic melodrama, hiding the Horror within it. Entering the 60s and 70s, the shape of evil shifts with the Possessed Child narrative, where the unheimlich hidden in the familiar is not human nature, but something more demonic, like Regan in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).

Chapter 2: The Exorcist

Religion, science, and monstrous femininity

American Society 1960s

The 1960s saw America go from its Golden Age to a time of civil unrest, with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1964 seeming to trigger the beginning of these events. That same year, the American army began to draft for the Vietnam War. Young people sought to flee the country for Canada to avoid the draft, while many more took to protesting on university and college campuses. The war effort became incredibly expensive, and the “war on poverty” that had begun earlier in the decade had to be left aside (Editors, 2010). The earlier half of the decade also saw several civil rights movements take off. African American citizens fought for the desegregation of public places. Momentum had been building since Oliver Brown won a class action lawsuit against the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas for the desegregation of public schools after his daughter was denied access to an all-white elementary school in 1951 (Janke, n.d., p. 1) In 1960, students in Atlanta created the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR), and began nonviolent demonstrations in the form of sit-ins, to protest racially segregated canteens and lunch counters (Hatfield, 2008). Focuses expanded, with protesters' demands including desegregation of jobs, roles in government, healthcare, and the reform of policing and criminal justice system (Janke, n.d., p. 4).

Influenced by the civil rights movement, women also took to the streets demanding equal pay and for a stronger role in American society with the National Organisation for Women (NOW) forming in 1966. The approval of the contraceptive pill during the 60s allowed women more freedom to work, go to college and delay marriage as they had control over pregnancy. (Rosalyn Baxandall, 2002)

The gay rights movement, which took off in 1969, sought to end anti-sodomy laws, brutality, and societal shame (Christensen, 2022). Towards the end of the decade, things began to turn sour, as prominent leftist voices such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were executed. More took to the streets in protest of the Vietnam War. All these atrocities, including the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis, began to take a toll on the jovial spirit that had persisted through the initial post-war years, and faith was lost in the country's future. Although religion remained strong, with 90% of all Americans considering themselves Christian in the 1970s, the non-conformist movement and influx of immigrants bringing non-Eurocentric religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, religious attitudes began to change. (Schober, 2004, pp. 66,7) America was amid an identity crisis, in what Carl Raschke called a “wreck of traditional religious as well as social values” (Chambers, 2021, p. 3). American

culture had slipped from one of high pride to a nation split, gripped in the fear of change, gendered disorder, and disillusioned with figures of authority (Editors, 2010).

All these stresses and strains on American life seem to accumulate and manifest themselves in William Friedkin's ground-breaking film *The Exorcist* in 1973.

Film Summary

The Exorcist opens on an archaeological dig in Iraq where we meet archaeologist and Catholic priest, Father Lankester Merrin (Max Von Sydow), leading the excavation. He uncovers a small idol of the Mesopotamian demon Pazuzu. Unsettled by this he walks away from the town he is staying in as women clad in black seem to follow him. He stumbles upon a larger version of the statue, with the sun burning red behind it and the sound of dogs fighting being heard, Merrin seems to grow uneasy in what we can assume is the demon making itself known.



vii MERRIN FINDS THE STATUE OF PAZUZU, *THE EXORCIST* 1973

The film then shifts location to New York and follows Regan (Linda Blair) and her mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), who is an actress shooting a film on a student protest in Washington DC. The audience meets the pair as Regan begins to act strangely, something a doctor refers to as a “nervous disorder,” presumably from the stress of moving so far from her home for Chris’s work, and the absence of her father. As her symptoms get worse, doctors perform increasingly more invasive procedures on her, and

soon the gentle girl we are first introduced to gets violent, screaming profanities, spitting at the medical team, and shocking her mother with whom she has a close relationship. Initially, Chris is discouraged from getting a psychiatrist for Regan as the doctor tells her that the medication he has proscribed to Regan usually works. But the medical team is stumped, and a psychiatrist is brought to see Regan. He, too, is of little help and only aggravates what is inside of Regan. The next time we see her is when Chris brings Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller) in to see her, in the hopes of getting him to perform an exorcism. A man struggling with his faith, Karras, also a psychologist, is hesitant to appeal for one as he too believes that there is a medical explanation behind the child's condition. However, seeing Regan tied up in bed, more of a monster than a girl and speaking with a male's voice about Karras's life, which she has no way of knowing (i.e., his mother's death), he is compelled to get an exorcism performed on her. Father Merrin arrives for this final act of the film to perform this exorcism, with Father Karras assisting. In the climax of the film, Regan is saved from her demon as both priests die, Merrin from a heart attack and Karras sacrifices himself, inviting the demon into his body and throwing himself out of the window.

Social Critique in *The Exorcist*

It is the portrayal of Regan's possession that opens doors for discussions that otherwise would go ignored, such as the tension between religion and science, and the failures of mental health representation and treatment (Chambers, 2021, pp. 33,4). The film is careful to not stray into the realm of science fiction. It carefully navigates the period's technology, like medical procedures and machinery. There is a relationship between religion and science in the film, an idea introduced through the two priests who also work in science: Karras in Psychology and Merrin in Archaeology. They are both reluctant to perform the exorcism on Regan before proper research is carried out. The medical professionals also see the benefits of the religious ritual as a form of shock treatment that may break Regan from the psychological state, they believe her to be in. The 1959 Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, (Vatican Two) saw a renewal in the Catholic church's outlook. Most importantly concerning this subject, was the church's recognition of the sciences, and that human evil can be explained through psychology, psychoanalysis and/or sociology. *The Exorcist* manages to critique strict allegiances to sets of extremes, such as faith versus science, or good versus evil and even encourages the acceptance of both as solutions.

This highly divisive period in American history had many clinging to their traditional values and conservative ideals, such as the nuclear heterosexual family, strict gender norms, and Christian beliefs

(Stone, 1994). This was intensified as immigrants from Eastern Europe and further afield brought what was considered blasphemous beliefs with them (Chambers, 2021, p. 35). The heralding of American innocence across the 50s was crashing down following the civil rights movements as the country's systemic evils could no longer be ignored. The Devil hidden within American society, taking the form of racial, gender and wealth inequality, was finally pushed into the spotlight. How science and religion in *The Exorcist* could react in tandem to Regan's situation illustrates how two different schools of thought can work together towards the same goal without compromising the other's beliefs.

Regan and The Uncanny

Meanwhile, Regan's actions themselves speak to the conservative intolerance of "counterculture" civil and women's rights movements. Barbra Creed explores the idea of this new depiction of what she calls the Monstrous Feminine (Creed, 1993). This term she coined as a way of separating from the male monster, as what horrifies an audience differs greatly between them. The female monster, she says, is usually discussed as the male castrated "other" with a lack of any notable female monsters, using Frankenstein and Dracula as examples. It is where female figures divert from the feminine norm, we get the monstrous feminine.

"As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'Monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity." (Creed, 1993, p. 2)

Regan's possession sees her depart from the status quo of feminine behaviour to a depraved display of feminine desire and sexuality. Her body is invaded by this attacking force of the opposite sex, transgressing the boundaries of gender, exemplifying this notion of gender disorder that was shaking America (Rosalyn Baxandall, 2002). Having a young girl entering puberty be the face of such a possession called to attention the taboo subject of female sexuality, and how for so long the repression and representation of female sexuality has fallen under the scrutiny and disgust of the male gaze. From the beginning of the film, women have been the source of tension and discomfort, with the black-robed figures Merrin encounters while in Iraq. These figures, stereotypically depicted as the old, wizened hag or witch, seem to follow him as he struggles internally with the knowledge of this demon he has unearthed. The theme of the male order being disrupted and unable to control the female figure lies at the centre of the story. Regan is unable to be treated or cured by any of the male medical

professionals, with her perversity shown through her body. Her symptoms before the invasive tests they carry out were relatively mild and lacked the sexual aspect that comes later- she draws figures of a winged lion and makes sculptures that resemble the statue of Pazuzu, her bed shakes at night which keeps her up and she makes communication with the spirit “Captain Howdy” on her Ouija board.

Once her symptoms worsen and her convulsions turn violent, the doctors forcibly sedate her several times to control her. A scene where we see the only act of physical violence toward a female is when the possessed Regan tried to force a sexual act on Chris, her mother. She hears screams and voices coming from Regan’s room and rushes in to see the room’s contents flying off the walls and furniture moving, while the girl repeatedly stabs her genitals with a crucifix, her face hands, and body covered in blood (either menstrual or self-inflicted through self-mutilation and loss of innocence). When Chris goes to stop her, the possessed Regan pushes Chris’s face into her crotch while a deep voice yells “lick me!”. This scene suggests the family home has been built on a bed of repression of sexual desires, with traditional values and virtues, either systemic and unconscious or intentional, resulting in Regan’s furious outburst against her mother (Creed, 1993, p. 41). This may also be the indication of Regan being queer and due to the homophobic landscape of 1970’s society, she has been ill-equipped to deal with and accept her blooming sexuality, leading to this act of fury against her mother.



viii REGAN'S HEAD TWISTS AS SHE STABS HER GENITALS WITH A CRUCIFIX, THE EXORCIST 1973

These sexual outbursts could also be a conjuring of Regan’s imagination as a way of coping with trauma. We know that her parents are going through a messy divorce and all she wants is attention

from her mother. This is why, in her possessed state, she kills the man her mother is romantically involved with. There is also the implication that Regan may be the victim of sexual assault at the hands of the character Danny with his often-crude remarks and the fact he was alone in the child's bedroom when he died. There are also elements of set design in the girl's bedroom that appear phallic, such as the blanket wrapped bed posts (as seen in the below image), and the movement of Regan as she is possessed is like that of someone being assaulted (Creed, 1993, p. 46).



ix PHALLIC IMAGERY ON POSESSED REGAN'S BED, THE EXORCIST 1973

Such symbols are where the uncanny resides, allowing for difficult issues to be addressed while still making the film available to most audiences. Freud theorises that feelings of the uncanny come from the implications and hidden cores of a story or dialogue. Grotesque and uncomfortable themes can be hidden within film, and are especially effective within the horror genre, due to the difficulty of portraying sensitive topics such as the abuse of a child (Freud, 1917). This theory is also supported using the demon which possesses Regan - Pazuzu. Merrin makes the point that it is a deity that "fights evil with evil" (Blatty, 1972). Regan's spirit friend "Captain Howdy", whom she communicates with early on, off-screen, is this demon in disguise. It is at the doctor's office when she gets violent initially, towards a male figure. And again, the demon first verbally communicates with someone when the two male doctors come into her bedroom. The abject sexual nature of Regan's possession, from masturbating with the crucifix and her demands at the doctor to "keep his fingers away from her goddamn cunt" to making advances on her mother may all point to a young girl trying to come to terms with an assault at the hands of a man and acting out in defence, all the while entering adolescence and dealing with the complications of her sexual development (Creed, 1993, p. 47).

Regan's effectiveness in exemplifying societal fears and anxieties can be drawn to the use of the uncanny "double", not just jump scares and gore. In her childhood innocence, she is an "empty vessel", as per Rousseau, and as she enters adolescence she is slowly learning and discovering her identity (Rousseau, 1979). However, when Pazuzu possesses her, she is suddenly filled with knowledge beyond her age and experience, resulting in her horrifying uncanny double. This physically corrodes her body, a physical manifestation of her conscience becoming exposed to the diabolical force of the demon and the resurgence of her repressed trauma. Although alarming, it is what allows the discussion of these issues to be held and forces them into conversations in popular culture.

While Rhoda in *The Bad Seed* is evil incarnate, Regan is corrupted by an external evil force that works through her. Both are different ways in which the uncanny has been interpreted to convey different meanings, but both are equally effective. In *The Shining* (Stanley Kubric 1980), Danny Torrance also has a double, in the form of Tony, the imaginary friend who lives in his mouth. But unlike Regan, he is not possessed nor is he the embodiment of evil, like Rhoda. Danny is a fascinating character who is deeply intertwined with the uncanny, and whose family, by extension become a diorama of the state of America by its release in 1980.

Chapter 3: The Shining

The Degradation of the Traditional Family as a Symbol of American Society

American Society 1970's

The cultural revolutions and tearing down of outdated traditions and values of the 1960s continued into the 1970s. The Civil Rights movement was turning its sights on the desegregation of public education. The women's rights movement saw the Equal Rights amendment come into force in 1972, which guaranteed women protection from sexual discrimination under the law. The Roe v. Wade case in 1973 ruled that unduly restrictive regulations on abortion were unconstitutional and ensured that the 14th amendment protected a woman's right to abortion. The Vietnam War continued until the middle of the decade when America was defeated in 1975. The war resulted in a devastating 60 000 deaths on America's side. Although the initial years saw an almost full employment rate across the us, which helped contribute to improved working conditions especially for women, African Americans and other minorities, President Johnson refused to up taxes resulting in a spiraling rate of inflation which left the economy severely damaged, throwing the country into a recession in the 70s (Dean Baker, 1996, pp. 40, 44). These events left the country exhausted and deeply divided. America was scared it was losing itself and questioning its place as an admirable country as it faced its first defeat in war. The equal rights movements that shook the last decade had opened fissures in its thin "American Dream" exterior and stripped it of some of its identity. The family became the mirror which reflected America's cultural and social shifts.

Roberto Suro described its changing shape as a "cultural war zone" between the ideal Golden Age and the New Multicultural Age (Suro, 1991). The family image began to change, with having a child outside marriage no longer bearing consequences. Single-parent families grew, with "mom and pop" households dropping from 82% in 1970 to 73.5% in 1980 (Rich, 1982). There was a slowdown in births, with the 1980 census seeing the slowest growth in American history, indicating the baby boom was officially over. Outcomes were now also being observed on the effects of the child becoming the home's centre. This generation gained the name "me generation" (coined by Tom Wolfe in his 1976 article in the New York Magazine). While the great social movements began to plateau, American youths shifted their focus to self-fulfilment and self-actualisation as they mapped their way through the new cultural landscape of America (Wolfe, 1976). The dissolving nuclear family was seen as a victim of the country's "moral decay" (Suro, 1991) by those still lamenting the loss of the 50s and its period of ideology.

Film Summary and Social Critique

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* arrived on the big screen in 1980, portraying the story of the young Torrance family; a stay-at-home mother, Wendy, and her husband, Jack, who has got a job as a trusted caretaker at the luxurious Overlook Hotel during the winter months, and their son Danny. On the surface, this describes a perfectly normal, traditional family. However, the film quickly establishes that it is a family suffering under the tyranny of the patriarch. Under the hotel's influence, Jack's mental state worsens until the final crescendo, where he chases his family in a murderous rage with an axe. *The Shining* is a widely discussed film today due to the ambiguity of the film and the numerous elements of symbolism hidden in every shot, leaving space for a plethora of theorising on its meaning, with the documentary *Room 237* depicting only a few of these. One theory suggests the film is an allegory of the holocaust due to Kubrick's Jewish background, the repetition of the number 42 (as in 1942, the year the second world war began), the colour-changing German typewriter model Jack uses and some of the music with two pieces Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta and Penderecki's *The Awakening of Jacob*, repeating throughout, both composers being anti-Nazi and had lived through horrors that denigrated the early 20th century (Cocks, 2010, p. 78). Another suggests that it is Kubrick's confession for helping to fake the moon landing (*Room 237*, 2012). However, viewing it through the social lens of the period in which it was released, the film can be seen as an examination of America as a whole- The hotel is a representation of the country itself, a physical embodiment of the American system, values, and history encasing the family unit within it.

A prominent theme in *The Shining* is Jack's patriarchal abuse, which the film explores through the eyes of young Danny. This is introduced at the very beginning of the film at a doctor's office following Danny's first onscreen attack of his Shine. Wendy says that five months before the film takes place, Jack dislocated Danny's arm in a drunken rage. Abuses in the family were still a newly recognised problem in America at the time of the film's release. The feminist movements of the 60s and into the 70s saw domestic violence regarded with new levels of seriousness, with child abuse only first observed in the 60s and the "wife-beating problem" only taken seriously in the mid-70s (Hornback, 2016, pp. 690,7). Before, the nuclear family home was held with such reverence. In contrast, with the challenging of traditional patriarchal values following the various equality movements, the traditional family was being held under scrutiny.

The film establishes the Torrances as the believed American ideal through its use of imagery, notably in clothing. Before leaving for the hotel, Danny and Wendy wear the American flag's red, white, and blue, as seen in the image below.



x WENDY AND DANNY WEAR COLOURS OF THE AMERICAN FLAG WHILE A BASEBALL IS ON THE SHELF BEHIND DANNY, THE SHINING 1980

Jack has expressed that his motivation to work at the hotel is to spend time with his family and repair the wounds his previous alcohol abuse and rage had caused, a worthy cause up until the events at the hotel transpire. The only cause of unease comes from Tony (Danny's imaginary friend who "lives in [his] mouth" (The Shining, 1980)) who objects to going. Also of note, in the above scene, a baseball is placed on the shelf behind Danny's head, a team sport that is an iconic image of America. It is a subtle foreshadowing of the film's climax when the family is past the point of ruin. Wendy's weapon of choice in defending herself from Jack is a baseball bat. The recreation of the American flag is present in the most pivotal scenes in the film. In the scene where Danny encounters the Grady twins, slaughtered by their father, two colours dominate the scene; red and blue against the pale white walls. And then, as Jack is breaking into the bathroom with his axe, his red jacket, the white door, and the blue wall again create a grotesque interpretation of the American flag, an ominous reminder that the land of the free was not achieved or maintained peacefully.



xi MURDERED GRADY TWINS, THE SHINING 1980



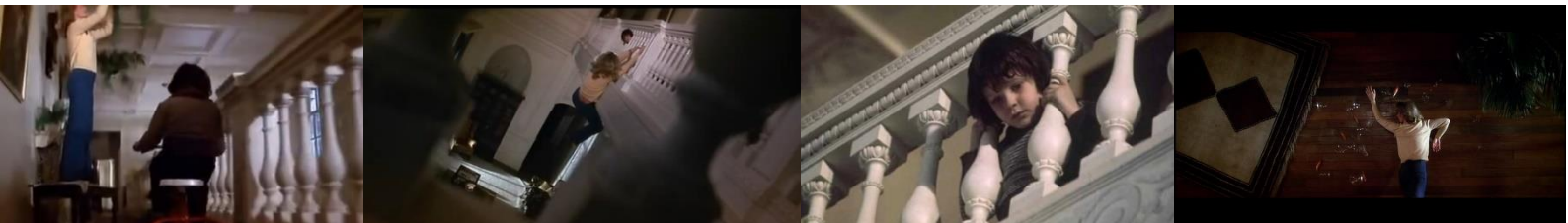
xii JACK BREAKS DOWN THE BATHROOM DOOR, THE SHINING 1980

In the film's final act, Jack takes lines from classic family-orientated television, calling out "Wendy, I'm home" in a manner of a white male father entering a scene in an old sitcom and also announcing himself in the manner of talk show host Johnny Carson ("Here's Johnny!") after smashing his way with an axe through the bathroom door. Using American pop culture staples against the terrible backdrop of the scenes created the perfect juxtaposition to illustrate American society's corruption effectively.

Danny and The Uncanny

What distinguishes Danny from Rhoda and Regan is that Stanley Kubrick purposely wove Freud's *Uncanny* (Freud, 1917) into his character when writing the film. Danny is not an evil child, like Rhoda, nor is he an innocent child who gets corrupted by an evil force like Regan. He is steeped in the uncanny and acts as a point of interrogation of the family, not the source of conflict or embodiment of evil in the film. Danny is captured in the ambivalent ideologies of childhood. However, due to his link with the adult mind of Jack, he is tasked with navigating between child and adult subjective experiences of trauma and memory (Balanzategui, 2018, pp. 36-40, 45-49). Danny is not the binary opposite of good, but his relationship with the uncanny is what gives the audience the impalpable unease of the *unheimlich* when he is on screen (Freud, 1917).

Danny's ambiguous threatening design comes partially from echoes of characteristics from other uncanny and haunted children in previous iterations of the trope, like Regan and her imaginary friend/demon Captain Howdy, and even images from Damien in *The Omen* (1976), are used, such as the boy cycling his tricycle into the stool his mother is standing on, killing her.



xiii DAMIEN MURDERS HIS MOTHER, *THE OMEN* 1976

These images lead us to believe something is amiss with the child, despite being everyday playful activities of normal children. Danny acts like a child, and the film is careful to use these examples of childishness that have been used in other films to suggest something being evil or amiss with the child, and by subverting these tropes in the second half of the film stressing the fact that he is just an innocent child and not the tormentor of the family (Balanzategui, 2018, p. 43). What does set Danny apart is his ability to "shine", a metaphysical, psychological ability to witness apparitions of what occurred in the past and what will happen in the future. He can furthermore communicate with other people with this ability, namely Dick Hallorann, the head chef from the hotel, whom Danny summons in the family's time of need.

The double is a recurring figure in the film. Tony, Danny's imaginary friend, is an extension of his psyche, and what Jessica Balanzategui explains to be an extension of both his and Jack's psyche.

“The entwinement of Danny, Tony, and Jack incarnates a nexus of psychic identifications between father and son: the child simultaneously represents his father’s other, his father’s ungraspable deepest psychic realms and pasts, and the future that lies beyond the threshold of his father’s death. Danny’s shining power and communion with Tony unleash the repressed pasts, impulses, and conflicted desires that erode Jack’s hold on his self-identity, as the child becomes embroiled with the obscure depths of Jack’s psyche” (Balanzategui, 2018, p. 47).

Danny's first solo scene, where he talks directly to Tony, is in the bathroom mirror. This scene is also the first time Danny has visions of the wave of blood pouring from the elevator and the Grady twins. As a way of highlighting Danny's connection to the uncanny, the film uses Jacques Lacan's Mirror theory: The Mirror Stage, Lacan states, stems from the first time a child sees themselves in a mirror and realises that they are an individual, not an extension of the world around them. This moment is when the self splits into what Freud calls the *Ego*, the conscious part of the mind concerned with the "I", and the *Id*, the unconscious part of the mind. When the child looks in the mirror, they misperceive their reflection as a whole being, not a fractured conscience. (Gallop, 1982/3, pp. 120,1) However, in this scene, Danny is not looking at an illusion of a unified self but a conscience that is split. His unconscious manifests itself in Tony and Danny's Shine.



xiv DANNY TALKS TO TONY IN HIS REFLECTION, THE SHINING 1980

Danny also uses his left hand when Tony is talking, which is of note as in ancient Greek and Roman beliefs, the left is thought to be linked to the spiritual world and "possessing no virtue other than...certain disturbing and suspect powers" (Lloyd, 1962, p. 57).

Tony exists in a liminal space between the child and the adult mind, so Danny seems to know more than he should, such as his caution about the hotel. Tony also recognises the other doubles that haunt the hotel, such as the twins who fell to their father's axe-wielding frenzy and Grady and Jack's link. Being caught in a space where he can see both past and future, Danny can warn Wendy of Jack's psychological state, and the two finally escape from his grasp as he freezes to death in the snow.

The child is the point of interrogation in this family unit but is not there to pull the family apart. We regard the world through his uncanny, childish psyche. This shift in perspective allows questions that would be more comfortable to be left unanswered to be discussed such as that of the traditional role of the patriarchy, domestic and child abuse. This power has been manipulated and abused through time and scrutinised through *The Shining*. It emphasises the importance of the child's voice in the family and the youth's perspective as society was in a liminal period of change. There are isolated problems within the Torrance family unit that the film is primarily focused on. However, Danny still opens the floor for these more significant questions. The country was battling an economic crisis, The White House experienced a scandal of its own with Watergate leading to more dissatisfaction with government and a new concerning illness was beginning to make its way into the country towards the end of the decade, only to be recognised as AIDS in 1981 (Borstelmann, 2012). The hotel is a mirror for American society to reflect on itself, to remember past mistakes and recognise problems in the present as the country was looking towards a new and uncertain future.

Conclusion

The quantity of uncanny and evil children in horror films and how their portrayal has evolved has stressed how important the child is to society's identity. These films have inverted Wordsworth and Rousseau's Romantic ideal of the carefree child, absolved from adult reason, and morphed this lack of reason into something monstrous. Children have become an effective vehicle for social critique, as the Romantic image of childhood is still regarded today. The perversion of this image produces a more dramatic contrast than if the character an adult. With the most vulnerable members of society whom we seek to protect, corrupted into beings capable of acts of evil with devastating consequences and acting beyond the control of their guardians, we are forced to confront challenging truths that would be easier left unacknowledged. The audience is exposed to a poisoned child, an allegory for a poisoned society and, thus, is subjected to a cultural catharsis. Psychoanalysis is paramount in understanding how films trigger this catharsis and how the audience interprets certain situations and events. Sigmund Freud's theory on the uncanny was significant in learning what made the children in each case study explored in this thesis so unsettling.

Following the Second World War, there was an economic boom. Young couples moved to the suburbs, and birth rates rose exponentially. With advertisements promoting the perfect family, new parents were under pressure to raise upright, decent children. Fears rose about raising broken children as juvenile criminality became an increasing issue. Innocent children were now recognised as capable of the most deplorable of acts, and so disturbing children occurred more frequently in film. Children appeared primarily on film as angels or victims, as in *The Kid* (1921) and *M* (1931) until 1956, when Rhoda became the first child murderer in American film.

Entering the 1970s, America entered great social turmoil as civil rights movements shook the male-white-centric foundation of post-war America. The possessed child narrative began to appear on screen, with *The Exorcist* in 1973 is the magnum opus, depicting Regan, possessed by a demon and filled with diabolic knowledge. Her naïve form becomes corrupted and distorted; through Freud's uncanny double, the demonic doppelgänger instantly terrifies audiences. At the same time, science and religion, good and evil, battled on screen (Freud, 1917, pp. 141, book ii) 1980 brought *The Shining* and young Danny to the public. With his metaphysical ability, Danny navigates the story between the adult and child psyche, exposing the failures of the traditional family and the shortcomings of American society. The characters in the film became an allegory for American society from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s and how it struggled to hold on to its old, dubious identity.

The uncanny child remains a reliable and effective trope. This year alone has already seen the release of *M3gan* (M3GAN, 2023), a tale about a grieving girl who gains an unhealthy attachment to her AI robot companion. Lydia invented M3gan, which at first was a brilliant invention that could learn and

adjust to meet the needs of her “primary companion”, Lydia’s niece Cady (Johnstone, 2023). Lydia became Cady’s primary caregiver after the girl witnessed her parents’ death. M3gan comforts and plays with Cady and takes over mundane parental jobs, such as reminding her to flush the toilet. She instructs M3gan to make sure Cady never comes to harm. However, the situation escalates, with M3gan brutally murdering several people who upset Cady, and Cady becomes overly reliant on her doll, slowly replacing Lydia as a parental figure.

M3gan deals with the juxtaposition of romanticism’s playful child in Cady, while M3gan embodies Jentsch and Freud’s uncanny child. M3gan, like Rhoda, is a perfect invention on the surface; however, she will murder without compassion if someone compromises her objectives. M3gan is an uncanny double. She visually mimics a child while possessing knowledge beyond that of any child, something utilised in both *The Exorcist* and *The Shining*. In theory, M3gan has become the perfect erudite child, but now in the form of a robot. She has perverted the child’s image. With her facial features highly stylised and her movement ranging between robotic and naturalistic, M3gan falls deep into the uncanny valley. M3gan’s evil also impacts Cady, as she is addicted to using M3gan. When her doll is taken from her for safety, Cady becomes almost possessed, screaming and kicking at her aunt, similar to Regan at the doctor’s office. The film capitalises on new anxieties of AI development as its central conflict. A significant fear is that AI will become so intelligent that it will no longer care for human life, as documented in the 2019 Forbes article *Should We Be Afraid of AI?* (Schmelzer, 2019). It also emphasised the issue of addiction to technology. Although technology is not bad, unchecked use of it can result in altered moods and potentially impact behaviours in how we interact with the world (Greenfield, p. 3). With Uncanny children in cinema continuing to rise as the world grows more complex and we face increasing social problems, one can only imagine what form M3gan’s successor will take.



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