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Baby Bitches From Hell: Monstrous Little Women in Film

Personally, Veda’s convinced me that alligators have the right idea. They eat their young.

— Eve Arden in Mildred Pierce
The Surrealists were fascinated by what they perceived as the dual nature of the little girl, her propensity for innocence and evil. This theme has also proven an enduring one in the history of the cinema and provided the basis for many acclaimed films from *The Innocents* to *Lolita*. The view of the female child as particularly close to the non-material world of fantasy and the imagination was central to the beliefs of the Surrealists. They regarded childhood as "the privileged age in which imaginative faculties were still à l'état sauvage – sensitive to all kinds of impressions and associations which education would systematically 'correct'". "Dissecting mystery is like violating a child", Bunuel was fond of saying. In the 1924 Manifesto, Breton claimed, "The spirit which takes the plunge into Surrealism exultantly relives the best of its childhood."

The Surrealists idealised the female child as the femme-enfant, and endowed her with a special ability to enter the realm of the marvellous. Through her, they hoped to return to a state of lost innocence and capture again that special state of childhood wonderment at the mysteries and magic of life. A famous Man Ray photograph shows a group of his colleagues listening in rapt attention to the young Gisele Prassinos reading her poetry, which to them, was truly marvellous. For the Surrealists the crucial aspect of the femme-enfant is her innocence. By virtue of her purity, she is able to make contact with the marvelous and enter the world of the surreal. Films like *Curse of the Cat People* (1944) and *The Innocents* (1961) explore the dark side of this experience. More recent films, such as *Poltergeist* (1982) take us – via special effects technology – right inside the surreal nightmarish world of the femme-enfant.

The Surrealists did not depict the femme-enfant only as an angel. Salvador Dali endowed her with a dark side. When Dali painted Shirley Temple, Hollywood’s quintessential image of childhood innocence, he gave her a red, sphinx’s body and long dangerous claws. Hans Bellmer’s dolls – twisted into the seductive poses of the nymphet – also point to the girl’s potential for corruption. Lolita, the deadly woman/child, was terrifying because her innocent demeanour concealed what the audience knew, that she was already corrupt. Innocence invites corruption – the more pure and irreproachable, the greater will be the child’s fall from grace. Still not fully developed or formed, the girl child is malleable, capable of representing destructive archaic impulses as well as innocence and the potential for good.

The cinema is similarly fascinated by the concept of monstrous little women. Mad moppets, deadly dollies, deranged daughters, sinister sisters – call them what
you will, there is no doubt that multifarious images of the evil girl child haunt the celluloid corridors of popular cinema. A far cry from her innocent sisters, the monstrous little woman is capable of truly shocking crimes. Images of evil children, circulated in posters and film books, are predominantly of feminine furies: Regan from The Exorcist (1973), murdering clerics, spewing green bile and rotating her head full-circle on her neck; Carrie, an avenging monster, drenched in pig's blood, burning up the entire school; and Lolita, the child-woman, sunning herself in her bikini, supremely indifferent, yet fully aware of her devastating effect on the wretched professor.

In contrast to her male counterpart, the abject little woman flaunts herself with such wicked style she is perversely unforgettable. Her diabolical deeds include: matricide (Carrie, 1976), patricide (The House That Dripped Blood, 1970), cold-blooded murder (The Exorcist, 1973), cannibalism (Night of the Living Dead, 1968), genital exhibitionism (The Exorcist), pyromania (Firestarter, 1984), vampirism (Interview with a Vampire, 1994) and witchcraft (A Stranger in Our House, 1978). We also find sinister little women in other genres: in film noir (Mildred Pierce, 1949), adult drama (The Bad Seed, 1956; Heavenly Creatures, 1994; Celia, 1989), boarding-school films (The Loudest Whisper, 1961) and the baby-doll film (Lolita, 1962).

Films about children invariably tell us more about the adult world, in which the films were conceived, than about children themselves. In particular, such films explore adult dreams, desires and fears projected onto children who become the bearers of adult values and attitudes. Until the 1950s films that featured the female child star, such as Shirley Temple, focused generally on the theme of childhood as a state of lost innocence. Innocence was replaced by evil in the decades after World War II. The image of the child in The Bad Seed and The Innocents took on new meanings which suggested that the adult world no longer dreamt of a return to Paradise and lost Victorian innocence, but instead sought to understand its own dark impulses via the potent image of the child. By the late 1960s the appearance of films which portrayed the child as a monster far outweighed images of innocence. Robin Wood dates the popularisation of the child as monster from Rosemary's Baby (1968). He sees the child as a repressed "other", a symbol of all that the adult world represses in itself from one generation to the next.4

A central feature of many films about the young girl is the way in which innocence and evil are interconnected; it is as if the girl's innocence opens the way for the
entrance of evil, one feeding off the other in a complex relationship of interdependence. Two early and influential films — Jacques Tourner’s *Curse of the Cat People* (1944) and Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* — represent the female child, by virtue of her innocence and imagination, as particularly susceptible to communion with a shadowy spirit world. Whereas *Curse of the Cat People* emphasises the girl’s openness to, and delight in, the supernatural, *The Innocents* depicts its small heroine as a sinister figure who is susceptible to hysterical attacks during which the spirit of a dead woman appears to take possession of her body.

What is specifically horrific about the monstrous little woman is that the potential of her body and mind to be corrupted is seemingly without limits or borders. The young girl of *Poltergeist* (1982) is swept into the “other side” via the family television set which sucks her into its uterine whirlpool; in *The Brood* (1979), blood ties initiate her transformation into a clone of the monstrous maternal figure; and in *The Exorcist*, a distant archaeological discovery of a pagan devil-statue leads to her immediate bodily possession and displays of hysteria. She is still a child, an innocent, but because she is female, and not yet fully developed, her evil potential — like her potential for innocence — is limitless.

Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject is particularly helpful in analysing the monstrous little woman. The abject is that which threatens to cross the boundary which civilisation erects in order to define itself as civilised — the line between human and animal, male and female, living and dead, clean and unclean, natural and supernatural, innocence and evil, adult and child. Because the abject threatens such borders and highlights the fragility of the symbolic order, it is also immensely appealing. It seduces by offering a return to the pre-symbolic, the archaic domain of untrammeled pleasure and uninhibited play.

The monstrous female child is a powerful agent of abjection. More rigidly socialised than the boy, in terms of external proprieties and proper “civilised” behaviour, she is also expected to epitomise worldly innocence and sexual purity. When she crosses the boundaries between innocence and corruption, proper and improper behaviour, the ensuing violation seems more profound. Considered less able to protect herself, the girl is more susceptible to corruption. When she falls, the hope of redemption is lost. And because she is regarded as weaker than the boy, there is a greater expectation that she will fall. This situation, of course, is not a consequence of anything “essential” in the nature of femininity and masculinity. If the monstrous
child of horror, tends to be more often female, it is because the culture constructs her image as more susceptible to corruption. Young and innocent, she attracts dark forces seeking a host.

The theme of sexual repression and hysteria is central to films about female possession. Again we see the fragile borders traversed; this time between sanity and hysteria. Once the impressionable young girl has been in contact with the dark, usually sexual, forces that lie pent-up in her youthful bosom, she is easy prey. The possessed girl has much in common with the mystical moppet—both dwell on the border between the real and imaginary. But whereas the girl with a vivid unnatural imagination has a special ability to enter into the mystical realm, the possessed child is taken over by a force from another world and transformed into a monster within the earthly realm. Films about possession by the devil constitute the largest grouping that star monstrous little women. One of the most commercially successful horror films of all time, The Exorcist, spawned a sub-genre of imitators whose titles emphasised her special relationship to evil in films such as: The Devil Within Her (1974), Demon Witch Child (1974), and To The Devil – A Daughter (1976).

Those of us who love horror films recognise there is also great pleasure in watching the monstrous little woman strut her stuff. The history of woman as witch, the association between possession and female hysteria, the cultural/religious fantasy of woman as sexually insatiable, and the popular myth of the girl as innocent and impressionable, help explain the greater number of girls—rather than boys—who star in horror films about possession. These factors may also explain the larger number of monstrous little women, overall, in the cinema.

The horror film permits a violation of boundaries, a return of the repressed, a carnivalesque breaking of taboos—these activities are its raison d'être. Although representations of monstrous little women no doubt stem from phallocentric bias, our daughters of darkness ironically have come to represent a fantasy, a potent symbol, of the way in which we, as adults, wish to remember what might have been. So much more the pleasure, then, for the female viewer, when the mad moppet is the one to lead the attack—to spew, curse and kill—to draw attention to the fragility of the symbolic order.
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3. Peter Webb, op cit, p47.