

# The Bad Seed and The Girl Next Door:

## Integrating Cultural Trauma through Horror's Children

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The murderous child of horror cinema today creates fear and revulsion with as much relevance as the archetype produced in Mervyn LeRoy's *The Bad Seed* (1956). The murderous child has the ability to carry the temporal baggage of a culture affected by trauma by allowing an apolitical outlet for memorializing the violence or the motive behind traumatic events that resist a narrative frame. Trauma is not the story of what bad things happened to someone, but the effect that persists both in individuals and cultures. As new traumas occur in a culture, the depiction of the murderous child may change to embody the trauma, thus constantly revitalizing this frequently used horror trope.

Trauma has both personal and social components. When traumatic events occur, the effects resonate through a population, changing the social and personal landscapes of those in its wake. In World War II, soldiers faced the trauma of being attacked by or attacking the enemy, but at home, the removal of the men from relationships, families, communities, and jobs required that those left behind reform the social landscape left in ruin. *The Bad Seed* performs a drama of separation; in her father's absence due to a military posting, a little girl becomes overly competi-

tive and amoral, eventually developing into a remorseless murderer. In Gregory Wilson's contemporary film *The Girl Next Door* (2008), a single mother corrupts the normal curiosities of children, turning them into militaristic torturers and rapists in a time when an exposé of American troops surfaces, developing both a civic and personal trauma of identity.

Cultural critic Mieke Bal notes the social significance of sharing the experience of trauma through narrative expression:

Traumatic (non) memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary event, not even an activity. In contrast, ordinary narrative memory fundamentally serves a social function: it comes about in a cultural context whose frame evokes and enables the memory. It is a context in which, precisely, the past makes sense in the present, to others who can understand it, sympathize with it, or respond with astonishment, surprise, even horror; narrative memory offers some form of feedback that ratifies the memory. (x)

Bal marks the emergence of narrative memory as trauma played out through drama when the present demands “the incorporation of the past in it” (x). This performance requires “a second person to act as a confirming witness to a painfully elusive past”, thus moving it from a realm of personal memory and into the consciousness of “the culture in which the traumatized subject lives” (x). Bal posits that, through this process of witnessing, “[t]he acts of memory thus become an exchange between first and second person that sets in motion the emergence of narrative” (x).

In both films, secondary characters observe the trauma or its effects. These secondary characters operate as witnesses, but they do not have the agency to challenge the murderous children. As witnesses — powerless as the viewer to change the situation — the secondary characters offer a drama that allows a narrative to emerge. Through

The murderous child is a planned incongruity; a combination of symbolic elements that emphasizes aspects of normalcy and the traumatic that would not otherwise be foci (Burke *Performance* 111-112). In the cases of the films mentioned in this essay, the children are from middle-class homes, represented as the cultural norm, but their characters have been combined with aspects of the sadist, the sociopath, and the psychopath in a way that allows audiences to experience a view of both the middle class home and a social trauma. This essay analyzes two films engaging differing traumas to produce similar horrors. *The Bad Seed* explores how societal upheaval in WWII-America enacts a social trauma that shapes the murderous child. Further, an extended analysis of *The Girl Next Door* examines how the torture of prisoners by Americans in *Abu Ghraib* distorts the scope of children’s acts, as they sexually

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the perspective of dramatist Kenneth Burke, the scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose interact to jointly determine each dramatic element’s scope of characterization within the drama (*Grammar* 15-20). When a child (agent) murders (act) others in a middle-class home (scene), the relationship between dramatic elements appears skewed because the act is out of proportion with the scope of the agent and scene. Since the murderous children are framed within a scope beyond the middle-class norm (that is, they are labelled terrorists), they are circumscribed at a social level and imbued with the agency of those known to cause trauma. When analyzed through the lens of Burke’s dramatism in tandem with theories from public memory studies, the murderous child can be seen to memorialize public trauma by integrating it into a narrative drama that becomes confessable. Through mutual performance of memory, a resolved narrative frames trauma in cultural memory.

humiliate and torture a teenage girl to death.

*The Bad Seed* introduces the contemporary murderous child archetype and demonstrates how the social trauma of WWII — combined with the rhetorical positioning of fatherless homes leading to juvenile deviance — creates a scope where the murderous child can exist as horror. Though the title character of the film is Rhoda, an eight-year-old girl who kills a classmate for receiving an award she covets, the narrative follows a group of adults — primarily her mother and landlady — as they argue nature versus nurture and express an interest in Freudian psychology. The drama begins with the father, a military officer, leaving for a temporary assignment. The father’s absence and the undirected discourse and beliefs about childhood deviance distract the adults from Rhoda’s actions, even when her mother begins to suspect her. Later the underclass groundskeeper discovers the truth but cannot inform anyone due to his position and

lack of credibility. A point that may be missed or incompletely analyzed by contemporary viewers is the fear that deviant youth would arise from homes and communities where male role models had been stationed overseas during World War II.

In *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, Columbia University journalism professor David Hajdu demonstrates how this theory was extensively addressed in print, newsreel, and television coverage. A contemporary audience could dismiss the film as a

reserved example of the murderous child developed on a setting of class and psychological theory, but the original audience was expected to understand the concept of juvenile deviance erupting when men spent time away from their families. Rhoda exemplifies these wild youths — the children left behind when their fathers had extended tours or never returned from the war. The murders she enacts reflect the trauma imposed on families due to the framing of the war by a public rhetoric of fear produced by the media, politicians and others with vested interests.

This vein of horror cinema memorializes traumatic events as they have been framed in the public discourse and reconfigures them for a parallel analysis. In his study on lynching and public memory, sociologist Jonathan Markovitz positions the role of movies that contextualize lynching outside its historical roots:

By separating lynching from its roots in white supremacy and by changing the gender and race of its victims and perpetrators, these films help to sever lynching from its historical ties. In the process, the metaphor loses some of its specificity and weight, as its weightlessness enables it to truly become a floating signifier whose meaning is indeterminate. (68)

While the social history of lynching is removed from the films, the floating signifier allows for lynching to be examined outside its overly-determined political context. In other words, the scope must expand to characterize the scene and act of a lynching that would otherwise disrupt the audience's expectations. For *The Bad Seed* to successfully present a child murderer in an era when the term *serial killer* was unknown, it relied on the trauma of war and the

understood effect of the absent father to make the character's agency and actions believable. Rhoda's actions fit within the scope of memorial, a signifier of trauma through the mimesis of the murderous child.



Jonathan Lake Crane argues in *Terror and Everyday Life* that horror has evolved to mirror a 1993 audience of “idiots living only to perish in deaths made memorable by their sound and fury” (154). Crane directly compares the audience's worldview to the scope of horror film, but he re-

mains fixed on the horror genre as a continually changing commodity produced for an audience with a singular taste — in other words, a genre dying at the logical extent of its progression through changing style. On the subject of horror production and audience tastes, Rick Worland writes in his 2007 book *The Horror Film: An Introduction*:

to say that horror films may reflect certain ideals, values, and fears of a period is not to suggest a simple or direct correlation between the form and content of a particular movie and an easily discerned set of predominant social feelings. To guess about the collective mood of millions risks claiming far too much for the predictive quality or relevance of particular mass-entertainment texts, each one only a small part of the deluge of mass-mediated messages and experiences with which people are drenched in the postmodern epoch. (266)

Worland continues further points out that anxieties related to the Y2K bug (the fear that computer networks would fail when the date changed to 2000) and anxieties in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks found their way into *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999), *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002), and the *War of the Worlds* remake (Spielberg, 2005). Genres may evolve and become refined at their logical end, but horror does not simply evolve through audience taste and changing cinematic styles. As new threats enter the public discourse, horror shifts to new foci instead of remaining dependant on refining the genre's style. New horrors become relevant when the public perceives new threats, and the pervasive effects of Y2K fears and the aftermath of 9/11 in the media and public discourse made these traumas dominant in the social consciousness.

A more recent trauma occurred with the publication of photographs and testimony of American soldiers humiliating Iraqi prisoners at *Abu Ghraib*. The concept of 'us versus them' as related to terrorism and victimization became confused in American public discourse. CBS News featured the story on its *Sixty Minutes II* program, with Rebecca Leung reporting:

According to the U.S. Army, one Iraqi prisoner was told to stand on a box with his head covered, wires attached to his hands. He was told that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted.

The candour of the photographs made them different from images associated with 9/11 and the military action surrounding the aftermath. According to English scholar David Simpson:

They take us in other words, beyond or around the sublime and spectacular, into some interior zone of ongoing confusion and obscure identification. They do not disprove or discredit the role of the spectacle in the unfolding encounter with death that those in the homeland have been experiencing since 9/11, but they impose an added dimension and demand a different response. (133)

The initial description of the torture of Iraqi prisoners at *Abu Ghraib* closely mirrors the torture scenario in *The Girl Next Door*. The film presents two young girls, fifteen-year-old Meg and her polio-afflicted younger sister Susan, whose parents died in a car wreck that led to the girls' placement in the home of a single mother, Ruth. The neighbourhood children gather at Ruth's house where she gives them beer and treats them to sexually suggestive conversation. Most of the children are pre- or early-pubescent.

The movie is told through the memory of David, a man in his late fifties, as he looks at a worn painting of a boy and girl catching crayfish in a stream. Through David's memory, the viewer enters a 1950s suburban world marked by deep, vibrant greens and the trappings of early commodity culture with stylish clothes and cars. The setting presents a nostalgic view of yards and houses shining with a Norman Rockwell cleanliness, but the details show the polish only applies to the veneer. The kids in the neighbourhood act like people their age would be expected to act when not under adult supervision. They have a juvenile interest in sex as a topic of conversation, as well as an undercurrent of aggression; the younger boy drops an earthworm in an anthill to watch the ants attack, and the oldest teen uses profanity and takes the persona of a greaser.

The most noticeable flaw in the suburban veneer appears in an early scene when Ruth's three boys corner and tickle Meg. The youngest brother gropes Meg, and she pushes him away. This provokes the oldest boy to begin calling Meg a bitch, but Meg, taller and stronger than the boys, pushes them aside as she leaves the room. The older brother drags out Susan who had been hiding in the closet, throwing her on the bed. Ruth returns and begins to question the younger sister with pseudo-authoritative jargon, and in the same scene she initiates the boys in their role as guardians:

"Do you know what it means to be in connivance with somebody who does something like that? Well, it means you're guilty too. Even though maybe you didn't do anything in particular, it makes you sort of a fellow traveler. [...] What she did was wrong, it's bad behavior. And you forgiving her, just because you love her, that isn't right either."

Ruth instructs Susan to lay down at the end of the bed and pull her panties down. When the girl does not comply, Ruth picks up her braced legs and pulls her to the end of the bed. As she pulls Susan's panties down, the boys looking down in embarrassment begin to walk out. Ruth stops them. "Boys you stay here. Girls just cry. There is nothing we can do about it. And this is for her own good, and you being here is part about it." As Ruth begins hitting the younger sister with a toilet brush, Meg runs in and is restrained by the boys.

Following this incident, domestic child abuse abruptly becomes ritual torture. Meg tries to tell a policeman what has been happening, but when he comes to investigate, Ruth directs his attention away from the situation and he leaves. Meg's punishment for informing the officer jumps to a scene similar to the reports from *Abu Ghraib*. In a dark basement, Meg stands on a stack of books. Her face is blindfolded in burlap, and she has been gagged. Her arms are high above her head, being held up by ropes tied to her wrists. Ruth, her three sons, the neighbour David, and Susan are in the room. The youngest boy tells David the game is that Meg has to tell something secret. Ruth stands back and asks how Meg can talk with a gag in her mouth. This prompts the oldest son to say, "we don't want her to tell right away." They begin taking books away one-by-one and demanding Meg to "confess." The older boy asks if Ruth minds if he cuts off Meg's clothes, Ruth responds, "No, it is part of the game." As Ruth prepares to leave Meg hanging naked for the night, she tells her:

"You want to think about one thing, girl. Well, two things, actually. First it could be your little sister standing here instead of you. Second, I know some of the bad things you have done and am kind of interested to hear them, so maybe this confessing isn't

such a kids' game after all. I can hear it from the one of you or I can hear it from the other. You just think about that."

The children and Ruth leave Meg hanging from the ceiling, and are seen returning in incidents where the children physically and sexually assault her. A May 21, 2004 *Washington Post* article reveals accusations by former prisoners who faced similar sexual humiliation. One reported that "Graner [a guard] cuffed him to the bars of a cell window and left him there for close to five hours, his feet dangling off the floor" (Higham and Stephens 2). The film does not directly question the absence of purpose and the allegiance of the children involved in torture, but it meshes the juvenile curiosity with the scope of technical complicity of military hierarchy. In a May 10, 2004 *New Yorker* article, one of the defense attorneys involved in the *Abu Ghraib* case, Gary Myers, is quoted as saying, "Do you really think a group of kids from rural Virginia decided to do this on their own? Decided that the best way to embarrass Arabs and make them talk was to have them walk around nude?" (qtd. in Hersh).

The question of who ultimately bears responsibility for the *Abu Ghraib* actions may never be known, and similarly, the film introduces a question of control, complicity, and connivance. In a scene without Ruth, the oldest son looks at Meg and says: "Fuck her. I'm not even sure that I'm done with you yet. Then again, maybe I am. I don't know. I just don't know." His confusion presents an ambiguous motive, and as those Americans hearing the details of the abuse, the culpability of the son reflects the concern of the culpability of the guards.

In the final scene of torture, Ruth sits in a lawn chair in the basement, smoking. Around the walls, the neighborhood kids stand where two girls drink sodas as everyone watches the oldest son rape Meg who has been stripped, is gagged, and tied down to mattress springs. In her final acts of torture, Ruth heats a hairpin and burns "I FUCK"/"FUCK ME" on Meg's abdomen. Ruth suggests removing Meg's clitoris, justifying this by saying they do it in places like Africa and New Guinea, adding, "Who am I to judge?". As the older boys hold Meg's legs apart, Ruth lights a blowtorch.

The reportage of sexual humiliation in *Abu Ghraib* presented the situation as American soldiers purposefully brutalizing the prisoners' bodies and forcing them to break cultural taboos. David Simpson writes that the public othering of the prisoners falters when they are removed from the context of being perceived as terrorists:

There is every evidence to support and contribute to theory's emphasis on the self-generated identity of the

other and on the reflexivity of a violence that cannot be restricted to one part of the system, as we are promised it might be by the language of revenge, of justice, of good and evil. That Identity that is also, in its more positive potential, the common identity of the human form and the suffering body, which also must be suppressed if the idea of a war of good against evil is to be maintained. (138)

The archetype of the murderous child allows the scope of social traumas to be expanded beyond the political rhetoric that originally framed them, presenting a stark re-examination of the violence or trauma from within the home of the middle class norm. In circumstances where the original event has left a non-memory, the murderous child archetype provides film with an opportunity to memorialize the trauma for a culture still dealing with its effects. Horror films offer the possibility of mimesis of social trauma, and filmmakers continue to characterize the trauma through the archetype of the murderous child.

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