

Violent Nymphs: Vampire and Vigilante Children in Contemporary Cinema

The problem with much common discourse about “childhood” or “the child” is that the collapsing of multiplicitous and complex identities into those singular, unifying categories is a serious oversimplification. Idealized versions of children are culturally produced and repeated in media and in cultural storytelling, often in ways that completely disregard any individual or noncompliant desire children themselves might have. These reductive narratives of childhood and its possible expressions often limit the child to a realm of acceptable performance that focuses on the child’s desirability and innocence; this focus, for little girls in particular, both requires and is couched in dialogue about their culturally-presumed nonviolence (both the lack of a predilection for violence and the lack of a capability to enact it). James Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence*, a study on the cultural construction of universalizing narratives of the desirable child, notes that such narrowness of identity definition is dangerous:

by formulating the image of the alluring child as bleached, bourgeois, and androgynous, these stories mystify material reality and render nearly invisible – certainly irrelevant – questions we might raise about race, class, and even gender. Such categories are scrubbed away in the idealized child, laved and snuggled into Grade-A homogeneity.¹

Collapsing children into a single sanitized category thus leads to widespread rhetorical practices of norming, of excluding any non-hegemonic narratives of childness, a term introduced in the introduction of this volume. If these narratives of “normal” or “acceptable” childhood are all that is provided, they will not only shape our discourse surrounding childhood; they will then, naturally, govern our reactions and expectations when faced with real, embodied, problematic children. Thus, oppositional narratives of girlhood are both positive for the discursive space of

girlhood as a whole and necessary to keep systems that devalue the girl subject from being wholly reductive of girlness. The violent little girl – specifically here, the vampire or vigilante little girl – is a confrontational reminder to the audience that it is impossible to reduce girlness to its social components; she asks that the audience “[relocate] the talk [. . .] tease the storytelling into a new territory, find new possibilities.”² Violent girls in cinema, particularly in these films of “impossible” and impossibly violent girlhood, have uniquely overt ways of exposing the social narratives of what “little girls” must be and the dangers of subscribing to that minimizing narrative.

As Rose points out, the social interest in maintaining a simplified, stable image of the child is one of maintaining the signifying status quo: “Children may, on occasions, be disturbed, but they do not disturb us as long as that sequence (and that development) can be ensured. Children are no threat to our identity because they are, so to speak, ‘on their way’ [...] Their difference stands purely as the sign of just how far we have progressed.”³ So long as “childhood” and its boundaries are considered sacrosanct, the adult can tell himself that he has left “all of that” -- any sexual ambiguity or uncertainty -- behind, as the now-adult has progressed past the stage in which those concerns are presumably resolved. As Rose explores, however, “childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind. Childhood persists.”⁴ “Childhood,” as a finite biological or developmental stage, has been redefined repeatedly in terms of medical and historical discourse, but it is the less tangible “childhood” of psychoanalytic and cultural discourse -- the “childness,” as articulated in the introduction to this volume -- which itself is a powerful destabilizing force. It is perhaps not childhood that persists, but childness. The biological stage can be left behind, but the decentering effects of childness are always already occurring in the self.

Terminologically, the discussion surrounding children and childhood is complex, riddled with vocabulary that is only subtly, connotatively distinguished. “Childhood,” for example, generally refers to the biological/developmental period before puberty – the age during which one is externally identified as a “child.” Freudian thought traditionally sees childhood as a stage, developmentally separate from adulthood, during which certain behaviors/mannerisms manifest, are worked through, and are discarded from the self before the adult self is realized. Such separation of childhood from adulthood, however, is as problematic as any binary relationship; implying that the two have no intrinsic connection or are somehow inherently different leads inevitably to the social assignation of certain qualities, traits, and value to each category. The biological separation of these two stages by the apparent marker of puberty (as though one’s body does not continue to change over time) makes it easier to separate specifically “adult” from “child” developmentally, by an apparently impermeable boundary, and to invest childhood (as a unified, iconic category) with these hegemonic significations.⁵

This investment is seen most apparently in language used to describe children and those traits and objects that are considered part of the realm of the child. “Childlike” is an adjective used to describe qualities that are expected and accepted in children, traits that are considered generally innocent or otherwise “harmless;” for example, enthusiasm or exuberance.⁶ The intentional and semantic simile of child-“like” denotes the positive, comparative relationship that its use signifies between the quality being commented upon and “childhood.” “Childish,” conversely, refers to those actions or behaviors that are undesirable, that are invested with negative value. Many of these traits are those that are actively abjected by adults, who are enabled by the false division of childhood from adulthood to see themselves as beyond or developmentally past “childish” behaviors, which are conscripted entirely to the distanced realm

of the “child.”⁷ Both “childlike” and “childish” can refer to traits exhibited by both adults and children – the main differentiating factor in their use is the tonal conveyance of approval or disapproval of the action or behavior, respectively.

“Childlike” is a useful term to reference the performance of behaviors or mannerisms that are expected from and/or accepted in children. So long as certain significant behaviors can be maintained as “childlike,” they become qualities that are abjected by the adult, conscripted to childhood.⁸ As Kincaid points out, the qualities that adults attempt to foist onto children are, for the most part, those defined by negation: “the child was the one who *did not have*. Its liberty was a negative attribute, however much prized, as was its innocence and purity.”⁹ Childness, then, allows for the reappropriation of those qualities into a structure that reminds adults that abjection, the very act of defining oneself by “radically exclud[ing]”¹⁰ or denying certain characteristics, is an unproductive and ultimately irresponsible method of identification and identity formation.¹¹

Certain cultural values (or concerns) can, of course, be more easily projected or inscribed onto a conceptual category of identity than on an actual subjective individual. Childhood, and what is considered “childlike” in particular, seems vulnerable to this kind of targeted rereading, and the construction of the modern girl is more demanding of that emptiness than of the modern boy. Kincaid identifies a few specific qualities that social constructions of “childhood” and of “desirable femininity” often share: “among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous.”¹² These qualities, many of them popular in advertisements for young girls’ dolls, all share a blankness, a vacancy that indicates the stillness and emptiness these kind of valuations require of girlhood. These qualities are particularly those adults see themselves as having “lost” or outgrown, conscripting them mainly to the realm of

girlhood as vehemently policed values, that are openly expected of girls. Innocence and purity, values associated both with being childlike and with feminine virtue, are standards of behavior that require absolutes; nothing can be generally innocent or mostly pure in a system that employs these kinds of “negative” valuations -- those that require the absence (rather than the presence) of action and/or intention. The reading of that vacuousness onto children and the concurrent hegemonic attempts to discipline children into pre-conscripted realms of “acceptable” behavior become disrupted when real, violent, destabilizing childness enters the picture. All of these qualities share an emptiness, an ability to be over-written that is reproduced in cinema either as a photocopy of the “perfect” or desirable child – one that exhibits the above qualities and ultimately endorses the heteronormative narrative -- or as a “monstrous” childness, one that actively rejects or performs against these expectations and is not able to be reabsorbed into a simplistic model of the childhood narrative.

The conscription of childness to these realms of inaction is often marked by the notable gendering of certain expectations. Hilary Neroni’s *The Violent Woman* examines the violent woman in cinema as a destabilizing force against the heteronormative gender binary: “One powerful example -- one that almost always acts as a nexus for concerns about gender identity -- is the violent woman in film. If there is one characteristic that defines masculinity in the cultural imagination, it is violence. The depiction of a violent woman upsets this association of violence with masculinity.”¹³ Neroni lays out reasons provided by culture -- protecting one’s family, “boys will be boys,” introducing lawful- or lawless-ness to the American landscape, and so forth -- for expected violence performed by men, but female violence is rationalized differently, on a more unstable and individually-determined footing, where the performance of violence itself often makes the female “monstrous.” This kind of difference in the treatment of male and female

violence extends to the child-versions of those performances, as well. As the aesthetic definition of little girls in Hollywood cinema is mostly concerned with appearance (i.e., fragile, small, high-pitched voice) and generic passive performance (i.e., vulnerable, easily frightened, physically weak/shrinking), it is particularly easy for filmic little girls -- through the medium of violence, of behaving in a way that dramatically and directly contradicts the cultural expectations invested in them -- to explode those boundaries.

Upsetting this binary/structural relationship also intrinsically upsets an understanding of the self, as the presumed concrete border between “childhood” and “adulthood” is shown to be similarly disturbable. Specifically for this inquiry, female child vampires and vigilantes are examined as sites of resistance to the hegemonic views of female and child performance that are encouraged in contemporary cultural definitions of “little girls.” Vampirism has traditionally signified the fear of the intrusion of the Other – or, in many cases, appears as an iteration of Freud’s “return of the repressed” – but here it specifically marks childhood as that which is Othered. Girlness, as a distinct and identifiable designation within childness, is such a rigidly socially-policed identity that its methods of rebellion are often enmeshed with its restrictive external signifiers. In monstrous children, the disruptive possibilities of childness become apparent, embodied in their empowered forms.

In a discussion of the filmic body -- as either a rhetorical construct or a physical, sexed object -- Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* considers a necessary duality: “Is ‘the body’ or ‘the sexed body’ the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is ‘the body’ itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex?”¹⁴ To distinguish between the physical, sexed body and the constructed Butlerian body in a film -- which is being consumed, necessarily,

through a visual/aesthetic re-presentation of the physical body -- helps establish semantic differences between discursive spaces, like those between “childhood” and “childness.” While both of these conceptions of “the body” have philosophical weight, of particular interest is the consideration of how the body as a site of cultural inscription with certain acceptable spaces and performances is integral to both the formation of boundaries (i.e., taboos, self vs. Other) and the slippages thereof. Filmically, the body is one of the main sites of character identification; from costuming to lighting, it is paramount that the audience be able to see and read the character as intended. Foucault’s body as “the inscribed surface of events”¹⁵ is what these aesthetic artists try to create -- a body that, aware of (at least some of) the values assigned to her by hegemonic discourse, finds a way to enact her agency more efficiently than any of the patriarchal powers around her. In the films under discussion, each little girl is consistently marked by two physical manifestations of her agency: violence, and the manipulative performance of the hegemonic construction of what child and female (particularly girl) bodies should be. Since violence is linked with acceptable masculine performance, its consistent coupling with outlandish, occasionally comical caricatures of “cute” or “desirable” girlness forcibly questions the “naturalness” of these provided (and rigidly enforced) standards of “sugar and spice” girl identity.

When examining the image of the violent child in cinema, looking specifically at prepubescent female vampires allows for a reading of the agency of the child-body as simultaneously controlled and controlling. For this reading, Eli of *Let the Right One In*,¹⁶ Abby of *Let Me In*,¹⁷ and Claudia from *Interview with the Vampire*¹⁸ are primary examples of the complex treatment of vampiric girl bodies in cinema. In each of these films, the female child has not yet reached puberty when her aging process is stopped, and thus can still be concretely

identified as having a child-body. Because the girls are forever girls (in that they are never women), they are afforded an interesting position: that of being simultaneously children and not-children, given their respective chronological ages. These girls' complicated position allows them and their particular childness to subvert Kincaid's point about the savage child, that "the energy in these figures would seem to work against the erotic emptiness of the [Romantic child...], the hollow child whose innocence allowed for the inscription of all forms of desire. But those naughty figures are strangely innocent too, protected by their ignorance and their 'primitive' status from bearing any real responsibility for their misdeeds."¹⁹ These girls have been consciously existing and performing this violence for years, in each instance, and are demonstrably more lethal than any of their male counterparts, so they can hardly be excused by the presumed ignorance or naivety that the "savage" moniker imparts. In fact, the performances of vulnerability and of "acceptable" girlness here have more in common with Kincaid's reading of Horatio Alger:

Those favored by fortune and by Alger get what they get (which, incidentally, is never fame and fortune but just lower-middle-class security) because they are pretty and lucky. Alger may have felt he was inculcating a Protestant ethic, but he seems to have exploited instead a pedophilic fairy tale, a narrative that runs at least as deep in America as Puritanism. It's not hard work that brings success but being cute, cute in the presence of susceptible adults.²⁰

The girls are consciously exploiting exactly that narrative, a deep-seated American phantasy that children need saving at all, that they are inherently vulnerable and always in need of adult help. Each character is aware of the emptiness of this expected performance (though in different ways,

respectively), and so these children are able to deploy those cultural/adult oversimplifications of girlness as a powerful weapon against the dominant group.

Butler's observation about the possibility of fighting back against paternal law and its methods of repression outlines a possibility of these girls' unique positions: "If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself."²¹ This particular embodiment, then, explores possibilities for rebellion within the repressive hegemonic discourse of girlhood, specifically by having the characters in question enact their respective agencies through a masterful use of (1) a rhetoric of "natural" or feral violence that is inherently theirs, and (2) a performance/usurpation of the hegemonic construction of girlness. Perhaps the violence is a necessary component of this reaction precisely because of those constructions that restrict girl behavior. Kincaid asserts that the "Romantic child was largely figured as an inversion of Enlightenment virtues and was thus strangely hollow right from the start: uncorrupted, unsophisticated, unenlightened. The child was without a lot of things, things it was better off without, presumably, but still oddly dispossessed and eviscerated, without much substance."²² The complete repression/exclusion of violence in any mainstream narrative about girlhood adds the quality of being unviolent to this specific set of values, so the return of violence (as a forbidden mode of discourse) to the performance of the girls is a direct way of engaging with that emptying out.

Children's bodies, particularly those of little girls, are constantly policed in terms of their signification. Smallness, frailty, helplessness, and naïveté typify misogynist images of both women and little girls in filmic culture: Shirley Temple, Little Orphan Annie, Dorothy Gale, and

Alice (of Wonderland) immediately spring to mind. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* asserts that

disciplinary power [. . .] is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.²³

The job of little girls, in many social and organized contexts, is to be seen; they are to maintain a particular appearance, and their “precociousness” and “cuteness” are qualities that remain accessible only through observation. Their behaviors are rigidly policed, much more so than their male counterparts; there is no female equivalent, after all, of “boys will be boys.” As numerous feminist theorists have outlined, the capability of women to speak back to a system in which they are embroiled is troubled by the presumed “always already there” nature of that hegemonic system. Girlness is given certain values, and so these violent girls will perform the song and dance, the trappings of those girlhoods, but only in their own certain contexts; the hyperbolic performances of helplessness and girlhood always intersect, just preceding and always facilitating moments of savage filmic violence. The performance of “proper” girlhood is used as a lure, preying on the projection of weakness onto girlness to ensnare adult prey. Girlness, particularly through the violent enacting of its agency, is a disruptive force that relies on the presumption of an inherent weakness or inefficacy of both the female and the child body, so most especially the girl-body.

Susan Bordo, while examining the need for “an effective political discourse about the female body,” calls for

a discourse that will enable us to account for the subversion of potential rebellion, a discourse that, while insisting on the necessity of objective analysis of power relations, social hierarchy, political backlash, and so forth, will nonetheless allow us to confront the mechanisms by which the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression.²⁴

Childness, as a deconstructing force, attempts many of these discursive confrontations through its boundary-blurring, its inherent tendency to destabilize and blatantly question power with a “childlike” lack of subtlety. Horrific violence is the bodily expression, the physical rhetoric, through which girl bodies are here able to explode -- or at least forcefully resist -- the mapping onto themselves of both “child” and “girl” expectations and norms. If, as Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* suggests, the very limits of the body are established by the same discourses that police and mandate its performance, then the body itself can become a site of reading and reacting to hegemonic marginalization. She asserts that “the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”²⁵ Boundaries that can be destabilized, that can be disrupted because of their constructedness (i.e., taboos), are coded as dangerous, threatening. Through violence, the girls this chapter considers are able to expand the boundaries of possible girl performance and thus to forcibly demonstrate the permeability of those boundaries (adult/child, human/Other) that hegemonic patriarchal discourse asserts are natural and attempts to keep sacrosanct.

The vampire girls are also eternally young, inhabiting impossible (and abnormal, though visually human) bodies, permitting them a situation slightly outside the normative dominant

structures dictating childhood and girlhood. This uniquely marginalized position allows the girls to be more operatively aware of the social positions they are always already expected to inhabit. As Butler notes, “the mark of gender appears to ‘qualify’ bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, ‘is it a boy or girl?’ is answered.” If these girls never reach other “natural” markers of gendered development, they become non-human, become “those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender” and who consequently “fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted.” Their visual association with stereotypically idealized expressions of little girlhood and their enshrinement as fetishistic objects for the protagonists in such context, however, belies their connection to the ways that gender, “the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body”²⁶ is not conscripted to the realm of “adulthood” but is expected to be absent in many ways from the expressions of children in order to maintain a particular positioning of the little girl as Othered, as non-threatening to the hegemonic discourse of gender. The liminal space that the girls physically inhabit – the void between (female) adulthood and childhood, as none of these subjects ever have or ever will reach puberty and have been trapped in that state for extended periods of time – is displayed within the vampire girl body, specifically and most notably that of Claudia (Kirsten Dunst). Her aesthetic engagement with the signifiers of “cuteness” and girlhood is singular among the vampire girls, as she is the most “appropriate”-appearing among them.

Interview with the Vampire follows the two protagonists -- Lestat (Tom Cruise), a decadent vampiric partier, and Louis (Brad Pitt), his somewhat reluctant companion – who have created a vampire from a ten-year old, Claudia, whom they intend to raise as a daughter. Claudia’s only action in the film before her re-creation as a vampire is to weep softly, calling

“mama” and clinging to the corpse of her decaying mother, before she embraces Louis. Even in her creation scene, however, Claudia exhibits a talent for the aggressive; she ferociously latches onto Lestat’s wrist, from which she imbibes his blood and her new life, and it is momentarily difficult for the much larger, stronger being to stop her. This is the first moment her intrinsic connection to violence becomes apparent in the film. This is a possibility for her only when she has been reimagined within a bodily identity that eschews the stereotypical role of the passive little girl. Later, Louis observes, “To me, she was a child. To Lestat, a pupil. An infant prodigy with a lust for killing that matched his own.” That same ferocity was earlier commented on as her being “now capable of the ruthless pursuit of blood with all a child’s demanding.” The rhetorical suggestion is that this monstrous manifestation of childness unites the willingness (childlike) and the physical ability (adultlike) to violently enact her own agency.

There is no surprise expressed in his observations that Claudia, as a child, would be naturally inclined to savagery; she is, in fact, the only character observed to kill in order to obtain a physical object (most often a doll). Kincaid’s look at the assignation of erotic value to specific, childlike features perfectly encapsulates the paradigm of Claudia’s situation: “We are told to look like children if we can and for as long as we can, to pine for that look. This imaginative dwarfing of cute adults into children suggests the extent to which ‘the child’ is both a fetish and a flexible construction that is, to a large extent, independent of outside standards like age.”²⁷ During Claudia’s transformation, she becomes less dirty and paler, but her hair also lightens to blonde and curls into perfect ringlets. She becomes the aesthetic ideal aligned with Shirley Temple, that of carelessly frolicking, always-happy, ever-young girlhood. She becomes the fetish, the perfect aesthetic construction of “desirable” or “appropriate” girlhood. Her porcelain dolls, which share her physical characteristics, are either given to her by Lestat on the

anniversary of her “rebirth” or claimed by her as the goal of having slaughtered a shopkeeper; she only keeps dolls that are aesthetically similar to her, except for the body of a young Creole woman whom she slaughters and keeps on her bed. The juxtaposition of the images of her current (and permanent) childlike form -- the ringleted and delicately frocked, easily breakable toys -- and the reminder of the permanence of her physical childhood recalls the difficulty of her position, the liminality of her particular child body as well as the complicated relationship of a girl to girlness.

Claudia is a culturally unacceptable body. The union of her age and “innocence” is incompatible with the required violence of vampirism and her natural predilection thereto, and so she is killed by a group of vampires who cite that it is “illegal to make one so young” (because of the assumed innate innocence and helplessness of children). She is executed for her existence as a visible space of socially incompatible ideals, even to those with similar internal conflict. Claudia is an abomination even to vampiric adults, who see the union of violent/sexual performance and childhood as unacceptable in the social order.

These girl bodies do not themselves visually evoke disgust; it is not until Claudia is violent or presents her fangs that her victims ever react in any negative way to her, and they unequivocally do so with stunned disbelief at her presenting a threat. It is specifically her positioning as a child that makes her unacceptable, un-integratable into hegemonic (even non-human, but still similarly structured) society, but it is telling that her visible body count is higher than that of any other character in the film. Particularly, her innate talent for killing prey and the overt glee she takes in slaughter are unique to her character in this film. The “adult” vampires are less savage, less instinctually cruel, than Claudia. Her apparently innate predilection for violence is an interesting way in which she is put on even footing with her male counterparts. Her

commission of so many of the instances of violent death in the film make her more performatively, visibly monstrous than any other single character – a particularly embodied response to the feminine association with the realm of the non-physical, as Elizabeth Grosz observes in *Volatile Bodies*:

where patriarchs have used a fixed concept of the body to contain women, it is understandable that feminists would resist such conceptions and attempt to define themselves in non- or extracorporeal terms, seeking an equality on intellectual and conceptual grounds or in terms of an abstract universalism or humanism. The hostility that misogynist thought directs toward women and femininity has been commonly rationalized through the deprecation and derision of women's bodies.²⁸

Here, however, the girl body is naturally more gifted, more able to function usefully, capable of amassing the highest body count of any character in the film; the filmic narrative in which powerful girl bodies can easily outperform the adult male company in a physical capacity is useful in that it engages exactly that arena that Grosz notes to be underexplored. The violent girls use the images and icons of the misogynist positioning of themselves -- Claudia with her childlike, doll-like appearance and dress -- in order to enact their will, their own primacy, through brutality. Perhaps the angle from which the corporeality of girl bodies can be usefully explored is one which necessarily must position their physical performance in direct opposition to all the social/patriarchal expectations of their bodies, non-violence primary among these expectations (and thus violence primary among the reactive expressions).

Interesting among vampire girls is the almost dissociative sense of identity that they display: bestial and calculating in one scene, then positionally and emotionally vulnerable in the next. The ability of the performer to consciously enact a masking performance of girlhood is tied

to her physical embodiment of a particular set of signifiers of that girlhood. In *Interview*, Claudia's reading of institutional definitions of girlhood is illustrated quite plainly through the recurrence of dolls around and through her. When she sees a doll she wants, she takes it (by killing the shopkeeper, the guardian of the object she desires); she is styled and dressed like her dolls, and she collects only those that reflect her new form. Her brightly-ringed appearance, however, is not as consciously achieved as it would naturally have to be; Claudia is given the ultimate girl body as soon as she is transformed into a not-child, into a body that is monstrously incapable of aging out of the chronologically-defined category. Kincaid discusses the social trope of adult beauty standards being associated with traits of childhood in a way that reflects Claudia's interaction with her dolls: "This imaginative dwarfing of cute adults into children suggests the extent to which 'the child' is both a fetish and a flexible construction that is, to a large extent, independent of outside standards like age."²⁹ Claudia sees the constructedness of the childlike image she represents, and she uses the fetishized (and thus necessarily reductive) view of children to strike back violently against those adults who would minimize her childness into the "childlike." Her performances are carefully structured to make the best use of her physical form, as her body is the source of her power as well as her ability to enforce her will, which is -- without her ability to violently resist -- disregarded as that of a child. If not for her physical appearance (as the idealized blonde-ringed, blue-eyed child), Claudia's body would not be able to hide so easily its capabilities. She also exerts control by manipulating her position as child -- she pouts, throws tantrums, and acts particularly weak around Louis in order to exact submission from the ineffective father figure. In her interactions with humans, Claudia plays the endangered innocent, calling "mama" and crying softly until her victims embrace her, completely unaware of the threat. The cultural assumptions surrounding girl bodies -- namely

that they are unable to survive on their own, that they are never a source of physical threat -- are what lend power to her hyperbolized enactment of those ideals. Not only do these exploitative performances of girlhood illustrate the metaphorical danger of making categorical assumptions about childhood and childness, but they are a way in which structurally conscripting individuals to a reductive collective identity is an underminable practice -- that there is a way, through a violent narrative of body performance, to use that dominating gaze to one's own advantage.

Eli (Lina Leandersson) in *Let the Right One In* is violent in only five instances in the film, but the occurrences are (except for the merciful execution of her first companion) marked by a particularly bestial violence. She is a rabid killer, as demonstrated when she lures a man under a bridge with calls for help, draws him close with her performance of childlike innocence, and leaps preternaturally quickly to his neck, forcing him to the ground and killing him. After she finishes feeding and breaks his neck to prevent his infection with vampirism, she leans forward over the corpse, weeping. Abby (Chloë Moretz) of *Let Me In* performs this scene similarly, though she does not cry.³⁰ Without the image of her crying over the corpse, Eli's repentant, conflicted figure becomes Abby's less empathetic, more feral (and, perhaps not incidentally, more digitally-altered) personage. This is reinforced by Abby's having called out "Mommy!" at the distant approach of the stranger rather than waiting for him to enter her immediate presence; she lures him more consciously, using the "lost little girl" trope to both attract and capture her prey, knowing that he will hasten to her aid and take her into his arms with almost no provocation because of her social positioning. Because of the cultural investment in the construction of "little girl" as helpless object, neither man thinks twice before stooping to pick up the small vampire body in the snow, allowing that very assignation of value -- of innocence and threatlessness -- to cause his death directly.

Further complicating her position, Eli becomes, after the death of her older male companion (who hunts and kills for her), a surrogate mother figure for Oskar. He is shown to have an unsupportive, inattentive mother, emotionally absent and unable to perceive that her child is being mercilessly tortured at school, and Eli not only steps in to fill the role of a concerned, emotionally-supportive parent, but also coaches the boy in his fulfillment of masculine social roles. After having been told the truth of Oskar's situation with bullies at school, she advises: "You have to hit back. Hard. Hit harder than you dare, then they'll stop." The vampire girl's ability to communicate the necessity of effective physical confrontation as a response within an existing social schema reinforces her existence in this capacity as a progenitor of violence. She does not seem interested, however, in creating a vampiric companion for herself -- engaging in procreative sex/feeding with her new young male escort any more than she had with her previous accompaniment -- but rather in passing on her knowledge of the transgressive capabilities of unexpected savagery, being progenitive of a new discourse of power for Oskar and herself.

In order to embody the split between the child body and the chronologically-aged female identity, *Let the Right One In* substitutes an older actor for Lina Leandersson (Eli) twice in the film, once when she is speaking to Oskar about her past, and once when lapping some of the boy's spilled blood from the floor. By literally re-embodiment Eli in the audience's eye as an adult, the concept of her as not-child is fairly cemented, fixing the audience with the idea of Eli's child body as an object, as a corporeal being that is apparently regularly divested from her "real" self. This specifically asks the audience to see Eli as a complicated physical being, one who has a "true" face that appears in moments of extreme violent performance, who is both a bestial ravager and a repentant child whose actions are regrettably necessary. Specifically, the scene in

which she climbs into bed with Oskar, asking him not to look at her while she slowly and dejectedly removes her bloody clothes after the execution of her former human companion helps to reconfigure her as sympathetic. By establishing that this dichotomy – that of bestial or violent and childlike or innocent – is one which must be exploded, the film allows the audience to access a less reductive concept of childness, one that doesn't rely on the "emptying out" of children as signifiers. Rather than "corrupt versus innocent," all the realities of this child are bathed or born in violence, allowing the binary structuring of non-violent/violent and innocent/unapologetically experienced to break down and simultaneously exist in a single body.

There is, of course, no reality for Eli, Abby, or Claudia in which they are completely adult or completely child, as the cultural distinctions between the two states begin to collapse when addressed with a non-normative performance, specifically a hyperviolent performance; this points again to the literal impossibility of this eternal-child who, by virtue of her performatively violent daily rituals (eating being a fairly nonviolent everyday ritual in normative viewing culture), is bodily coded also as not-child -- specifically, as not girl-like. Some narratives offer an alternative to this necessarily impossible body; rather than invest their characters with a non-human identity, films featuring vigilante girls find their troubled understanding of girlhood in the human bodies themselves (and their potential, of course, for violence). Vigilante girls are significant because they embody violent girlness in a theoretically possible body. One of the two protagonists of *Kick-Ass*,³¹ Hit-Girl (Chloë Moretz), is the human answer to the questions of embodiment raised by the vampiric girls. She is trained in gunplay, calls the massacres which she performs "a game," and never attacks an adult that she does not kill; she is not, however, invested with any particular super-human powers. She has been trained since she was five to affectionately produce violence and quite obviously enjoys committing murder, a curious

difference from the vampiric girls, who often regret the butchery they commit. She uses her understanding of the cultural construction of girlhood to perform it almost as a kind of Butlerian drag: Hit-Girl's first costumed appearance in the film is in a plaid schoolgirl skirt and a purple bobbed wig, and her first line, spoken from behind the collapsing corpse of her first on-screen kill, is "Okay, you cunts. Let's see what you can do now." Her use of such a specifically offensive gendered insult precedes her playing "eeny, meeny, miny, moe" to select her next target and slaughtering everyone in the room – mocking their expectations of her as a child, as a girl, while her girlness violently rejects their reading onto her.

The violence of the vampire girls, because of their biological necessity and their need to drain their prey, is done in animalistic, close-quarters moments. They do, however, all share a predilection and passion for bloodshed that outpaces that of their adult contemporaries. Hit-Girl, however, has no such need to restrain herself – she chooses to kill and does so with aplomb, enthusiastically taunting her victims. Her violence is more far-reaching and performative than that of the vampire girls. She kills 41 people over the course of the film in much more gorily excessive ways than her immortal counterparts, and she openly taunts her victims both before and after their deaths. In all of these cases, their external projections of "appropriate" girlhood -- which, for observers/targets, marked them as weak, unthreatening, and actively in need of assistance -- enabled their violence. The girls exploit reductive and oversimplistic ideas of girlness to strike back at the hegemonic structure that constructed them, using violence as the bodily expression of that speaking back.

Mindy evolves as the ultimate mass murderer -- Hit-Girl -- because her father has trained her to do so; her predilection for violence, however, and ability to commit certain acrobatic feats of physics in order to slay her opponents are exclusive to her character, intrinsically hers. She is

both the most sarcastic and the most vulgar character in the movie. Both her physical violence and her verbal ferocity specifically point to a different breed of the impossibly adult child – she is the ultimate vigilante child, embodying simultaneously a methodical and thoughtful killer (one who refuses even her own name in favor of her “super” alter-ego until the end of the film) and a monstrous (but, importantly, not bestial or feral) embodiment of a child’s potential for performing and legitimately enjoying savage destructiveness.

The first time the audience sees Hit-Girl, it is as her everyday, alter-ego self: Mindy -- a little blonde girl in a pink overcoat and hat, standing in an empty drainage ditch across from her father (Nicholas Cage), who is holding a gun at his side and intends to shoot her in the (armored) chest. Her first line is, “Daddy, I’m scared.” The film immediately associates her character with the stereotypical color, rhetoric, and emotionality of girlhood, which makes her affection for violence and vulgarity a more jarring (and thus more effective) juxtaposition. The proposal of her father -- that she take three bullets at close range so that she is prepared when the scenario arises in real life -- is one she responds to with aplomb, asking to go bowling and get ice cream afterwards. Her interests, ultimately, are more invested in her violent performance than in seriously pursuing the prescribed “desires” of her hegemonically-defined identity.

Mary Douglas suggests that the body itself is not simply material, but that its boundaries are constituted by and simultaneously are the boundaries of the social, of the patriarchal hegemonic. They are partially constituted by definitions of what certain bodies can or can’t do, couching the rhetoric in biological arguments; when an “impossible” body appears, then, it subverts the supposed concreteness of the limits placed upon it. Hit-Girl’s ability to massacre on the scale that she does -- neatly slaughtering eight large, armed, enraged men during the first two minutes she appears on-screen in costume -- is her near-impossibility, though she is not

inhumanly so. Hit-Girl's first image of the film is one of her capacity for violence, her appearance from behind the falling corpse of her first victim. Any time she (even out of costume) performs characteristics of stereotypical constructions of girlhood, she does so consciously, with a distinct purpose: to gain some kind of advantage, and always in the context of facilitating violence. This performativity rather plainly calls into question the legitimacy of such distinctions ("child" or "female," for example) since the conscious usurpation of the idealized image of girlhood is done so consistently and effortlessly by the ones who can monstrously enact their girlness as a practical component of their childness.

Importantly, all these images of the child-as-violent-performer commonly express, at one point or another, some level of desire to return to the normative social order. Claudia envies women and their ability to develop sexually, Eli and Abby show remorse for their killings and an apparently intractable need to bond with other like-aged children, and Hit Girl ends the film happily ensconced in a public school environment. (Importantly, the last shot of her character leaves her an "acceptable" outlet for her violent expression: excitedly smiling and cracking her knuckles at the bullies who, buying into the hegemonic iconography of girlness as inherently weak, accost her. The vigilante girl has a place in society so long as her violence is surprising or comical; there is no place for her costumed alter-ego, the aesthetic iteration of her powerful girlness.) These girls are not irretrievably Othered in the language of the film; they are not operating completely outside of a discourse of sympathetic desires. These images of fragmented, impossible young girls' bodies are a discursive space wherein childness (and specifically girlness), as a hegemonically conscripted and policed identity, can be utilized as a useful tool of rebellion when consciously performed and paired with a "natural" appetite/aptitude for violence.

Perhaps the most “perfect” example of the vigilante girl is Hayley (Ellen Page) of *Hard Candy*,³² because she is totemic, emblematic of “every little girl you ever watched, touched, hurt, screwed, killed” as she tells the pedophile, Geoff (Patrick Wilson), whom she has hunted before the start of the film and whom she drives to suicide by the end of it. Interestingly, she commits almost no real physical violence – her ability to damage her opponent psychologically, whose only constant companion seems to have been denial, is impressive, to say the least. One of her first accusatory statements to Geoff is that he found her on the internet, in a chat room, at that site of suburban parental panic about strangers preying on their children: “I went into other chat rooms using other screen names and watched as you’d get to know other women – then drop the chats when you realized they were older than me. You took your sweet time sniffing out someone my age.” She was the predator in this situation; however, she took the time to make new profiles detailing different girls, at all different ages, until she hit the right categorical preference. She mocks her prey, allowing him moments of escape that the audience realizes only afterwards are all premeditated. Though she claims to be getting specific revenge for the missing Donna Mauer, Hayley’s violent girlness is not only a response to violence against girlhood but is a categorical vengeance, taken against a pedophile, a presumed predator of also presumably more impressive physical build. The toast during which Hayley poisons Geoff with a sedative (the action that kicks off her revenge plot) is “Carpe omnius” – as she translates it: “Take it all.” That is what these girls can do; they can have a narrative that is outside the boundaries of what is hegemonically and heteronormatively “acceptable,” can challenge why the definition of girlhood is necessarily such a reductive one that posits them as always already potential victims. Violent incarnations of girlhood in film allow for the performative upsetting of these kinds of structurally-embedded presumptions. More than that, they demand that we look at the

presumptions – cute, weak, innocent, and the host of others – that we make culturally about girlhood as a whole.

¹ James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), 20.

² Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 24.

³ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: UPenn, 1993), 13.

⁴ Rose, *Peter Pan*, 12.

⁵ Kincaid notes that, in terms of the definition of childhood and the way it has changed over time, “innocence was filed down to mean little more than virginity coupled with ignorance; the child was, therefore, that which was innocent: the species incapable of practicing or inciting sex,” with the attendant warning about this redefining that “the irony is not hard to miss: defining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we’re trying to banish.” The qualities identified as “childlike,” therefore, are those that the adult has abjected from itself, has named Other and distinct from adulthood.

⁶ Many of these qualities are associated specifically with innocence/naïveté, two of the most openly sexualized qualities that, as Kincaid points out, are also ascribed to the realm of the child.

⁷ When one is “being childish” – an extremely common phrase at the moment in pop culture – one is being selfish, petulant, unremittingly annoying, uncompromisingly stubborn. The host of ways in which this phrase is used to reference undesirable behavior is a testament to our rhetorical ability to assign value to both characteristics and to childhood simultaneously.

⁸ “Abjected” here refers to the general sense in which, according to Julia Kristeva, that which is abject does not “respect borders, positions, rules” while it “disturbs identity, system, order.”

⁹ Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 15.

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

¹¹ The interesting problem with this terminology – that something is “childlike” when it occurs expectedly or desirably but is “childish” when it occurs outside of the approved disciplinary structures of childhood – indicates the way in which the language that structures child-performance relies on categorizing certain qualities as abject, fearing Freud’s return of the (“childish”) repressed.

¹² Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 14.

¹³ Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 19.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 164.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. Donald Bouchard, Sherry Simon, and ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 148.

- ¹⁶ *Let the Right One In*, directed by Tomas Alfredson (2008; Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.
- ¹⁷ *Let Me In*, directed by Matt Reeves (2010; Anchor Bay, 2011), DVD.
- ¹⁸ *Interview with the Vampire*, directed by Neil Jordan (1994; Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.
- ¹⁹ Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 57.
- ²⁰ Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 66-67.
- ²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 119.
- ²² Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 53.
- ²³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 187.
- ²⁴ Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," in *writing on the body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia, 1997), 92.
- ²⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1969), 115.
- ²⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 142.
- ²⁷ Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 18.
- ²⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: IUP, 1994), 14.
- ²⁹ Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 18.
- ³⁰ Many of their scenes, in fact, are practically identical (as they are adaptations of the same character), and so Abby will only be discussed here in terms of her differences to Eli's character/performance.
- ³¹ *Kick-Ass*, directed by Matthew Vaughn (2010; Lionsgate, 2010), DVD.
- ³² *Hard Candy*, directed by David Slade (2005; Lionsgate, 2006), DVD.