

## Constructing a Mystical Iconography<sup>1</sup>: The Omen

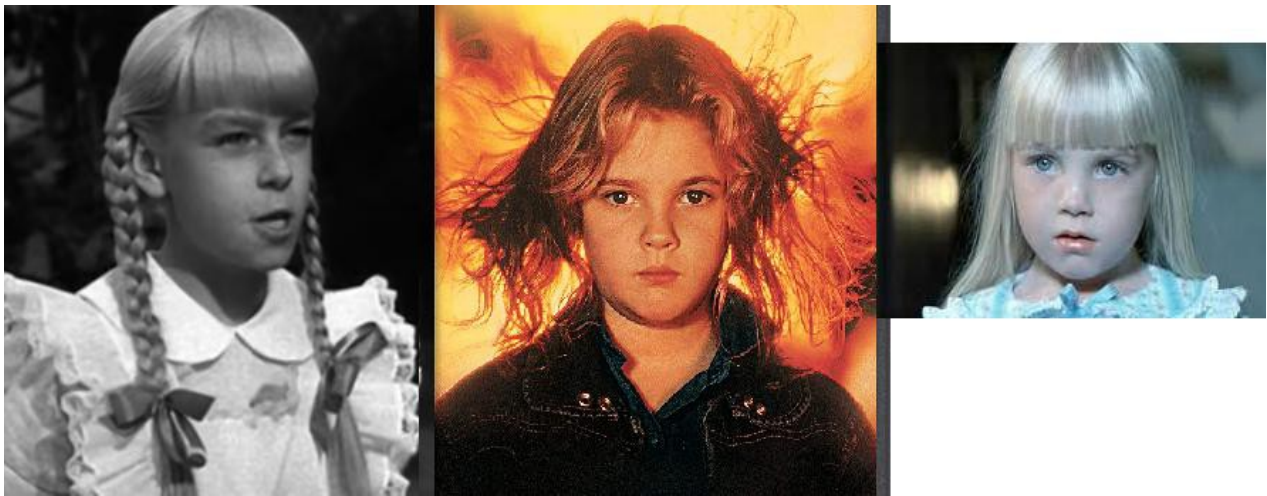
- *The Omen* is a sophisticated film on the Antichrist, Damien Thorn. Its efficacious use of Biblical prophecies, historical settings, and its international cant contributes to an “iconography” that perverts Christian themes to sustain an occultist subculture.
- *The Omen* and several other films allude to a literary tradition of paintings holding a mystical or quasi-mystical characteristics.
- A corruption of innocence is accepted, actually celebrated.



*Yigaels Wall from The Omen*

Take a child. Imbue the child with satanic powers. Add priests, crucifixes, inexplicable disasters, allusion to Biblical prophecies and set this in a country with a intense sense of Christian ethic, however residual among those with lapsed faith. Situate it in an upper to upper-middle class household. This is exactly what the producers of *The Omen* did. Other films use this strategy. In *The Bad Seed*, a girl, Rhoda Penmark murders without compunction. After she kills several characters, Rhoda's grand-father exposes her heritage: she is not his grand daughter but a serial killer's grand daughter. Rhoda confesses to killing old ladies for trinkets, a classmate for a penmanship meddle, and to tampering with evidence connected to a murder.

Later, shades of *The Bad Seed* were seen in Steven King's *Carrie*. Carrie is no child but she is child like, without complication, understanding of her body and “social” graces. Carrie's insane mother claims Carrie is illegitimate. Carrie kills through vindictive thoughts taunting, vicious high school classmates. But these were not set in the genteel landscape where Robert Thorn from *The Omen* can consult with physicians, historians, and clergy versed in the esoteric.



*The Bad Seed, Firestarter, and Poltergeist*

With the exception of *The Exorcist* based on a book *Possession*, *The Omen* is in a distinct class from other films which obliquely look to the innocence of childhood and the veneration and the vulnerability of Christ as a child, and pervert these. *The Omen* is sophisticated with its confluence of politics, business, and internationalism, its cynical use of Christian themes and its concern for the “seed of Satan,” a direct “counterpoint” to Christ. Through a series of mishaps, Robert Thorn as Damien's father learns his child is the son of a jackal and Satan. As Thorn attempts to murder Damien, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is warped with the rich tradition of Hollywood's vampire lore. Like Herod, Sam Neil as Damien in the *Omen III* has his henchmen kill children born on a day prophesied to be Christ's second coming. Damien is confirmed as Satan from the 666 his scalp bears, his invincibility to physical injury, and the wall called “Yigael's Wall” with his likeness on it in. Supernatural forces, Rotweiller dogs, wicked nurse maids, and people with hidden allegiances for the Antichrist clear Damien's path to attain higher office in later installments of *The Omen* franchise.



*Damien's father tries to kill him*

In the film *The Shining* based on Stephen King's book, the tricycle is like Damien's from *The*

*Omen*. The book is named for the ability to “telepathically communicate.” Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrence is the winter caretaker at the Overlook in Colorado, site of “an ancient Indian burial ground” like the house in *The Poltergeist*. Like *Amityville Horror*, it is also the scene of a family murder. Torrence in the *Omen* goes insane and his death is a welcome end to a bone chilling pursuit of Danny through the hotel's snowy maze. Like *Dark Shadows* and *The Omen*, likenesses in pictures contribute to the eerie, *quasi*-mystical essence of the *Shining*. Torrence's likeness is in a “group photo” after his death.



*Tricycle scenes from The Omen and from The Shining*

Oscar Wilde could claim to be the first to write on pictures with mystical characteristics, at least in literature, but this is not exactly the case. M.R. James in “Count Magnus” writes of

The portrait of Magnus de la Gardie was one of the best in the house, and Mr. Wraxall studied it with no little interest after his day's work. He gives no detail description of it, but I gather the face impressed him rather by its power than by its beauty or goodness; in fact, he writes, Count Magnus was a phenomenally ugly man.”

In the mausoleum, Wrexell the researcher finds three sarcophagi with the main sarcophagi that of “Count Magnus” with scenes on it; a battle, an execution, and a third:

In a third, among trees, was a man running at full speed, with flying hair and outstretched hands. After him followed a strange form; it would be hard to say whether the artist had intended it for a man, and was unable to give the requisite similitude, or whether it was intentionally made as monstrous as it looked. In view of the skill with which the rest of the drawing was done, Mr. Wraxall felt inclined to adopt the latter idea. The figure was unduly short, and was for the most part muffled in a hooded garment which swept the ground. The only part of the form which projected from that shelter was not shaped like any hand or arm. Mr. Wraxall compares it to the tentacle of a devil-fish, and continues: 'On seeing this, I said to myself, “This, then, which is evidently an allegorical representation of some kind – a fiend



*The Collins Stoddard Mausoleum from Dark Shadows*

pursuing a hunted soul – may be the origin of the story of Count Magnus and his mysterious companion. Let us see how the huntsman is pictured: doubtless it will be a demon blowing his horn.: But, as it turned out there was no such sensation figure, only the semblance of a cloaked man on a hillock, who stood leaning on a stick, watching the hunt with an interest which the engraver had tired to express in his attitude.”<sup>ii</sup>

James' short story, “The Haunted Doll House” too has a doll house purchased from an antique shop take on “magical” or mystical “energies.” “Quintessence of Horace Walpole, that's what it is: he must have had something to do with the making of it.” Such was Mr. Dillet's reflection as he knelt before it in reverent ecstasy.”<sup>iii</sup> Like *The Shining*, and *Amityville Horror*, and those strewn through out *The Omen*, James' story has as its basis family murder, though this time by a frog “the size of man” with white hair.



*From the 1953 film The Maze which has a frog as the lord of the castle*

With motion pictures, the mystical effect previously the domain of portraiture in Gothic castles or has a profound impression “larger than life” amplified ten-fold . What is normally acceptable is continuously violated and built upon by later filmmakers, producers, directors, and screenwriters. To passively watch on screen a hapless adult struggle with vampire is upsetting. To see children as in *Dark Shadows* sit in cemeteries, locked in mausoleums, consorting with people presumed dead should not meet with nonchalance as it surely has from the later installments of *Dark Shadows* and films like *The Omen*, *Firestarter*, and *Poltergeist* where children were central, often the antagonists worthy of death.

- i Iconography: The art of illustration by means of pictures, images, or symbols. In the study of art, the descriptions and classification of images in order to establish the thematic significance of the subject matter depicted; also the subject matter itself. (Standard College Dictionary, 1968).
- ii M.R. James, Count Magnus.
- iii M. R. James, The Haunted Doll's House.