CHAPTER 3

Demons Are a Girl’s Best Friend
Possession as Transgression

One of the highlights of my undergraduate days was when I had the pleasure to take a class on “Horror and Gender” in the Women’s Studies department. It was, indeed, a protoscholar’s dream—my two favorite academic obsessions together in one class: gender and genre, queerness and horror. In the discussion the day after watching Brian DePalma’s Carrie, the class examined the abject monstrousness of Carrie White as she annihilated the student body in her high school gymnasium. One by one, the students publically registered their disgust. To my fellow classmates, Carrie was a monster, on par with Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, or Leatherface. Finally I raised my hand and asked, meekly, “Didn’t anyone else feel sorry for her? I mean, didn’t we all want her classmates to die?”

Silence—not one vote of support for my (apparently) wildly askew worldview. Some context is in order: I was in this class in September of 1999, just five months after the Columbine High School Massacre, at that time the most deadly school shooting in history. It was not a time to vocalize your darkest revenge fantasies. It was also a tangible reminder of how “meaning” exists somewhere between text and spectator—and how it can be transformed by social identity, the site of exhibition, or historical context. But still, it was a strange moment for me. It is an eye-opening experience being confronted with the oppositional nature of your pleasure. When you find yourself in that consensus-aligned space where your sundry desire is marked as outside or unauthorized, the relative safeness of cinematic fantasy becomes shaken. Ruby Rich once claimed that cinema “inspire[s] gay and lesbian viewers to become . . . ‘ultimate dialecticians,’ watching the screen (hopefully) out of one eye, and members of the audience (suspiciously) out
of the other.”¹ In that moment, offering up my own perversity for public consumption, I felt as though I had not been watchful enough.

In her introduction to *Perverse Spectators*, Janet Staiger uses the notion of *perversion* spectatorship to describe a relationship to the cinematic that does not “do what is expected” and chooses to “rehierarchize from expectations.”² The breadth of Staiger’s term allows for a wide incorporation of reception practices, from reading horror within a camp or comedic framework to consideration of cult reception and alternative systems of value. As such, I find the possibilities of the term useful in discussing the films of adolescent female possession, as perversion-become-spectatorship is both the films’ unspeakable horror and the films’ disavowed promise. The taboo breaking of these films—the sexualized child, the violent child, the uncontrolled child, the abused child—opens a phantasmagoric space for spectators to become perverse and to wallow in perversity. I am also drawn to the term’s fraternal connection to queer spectatorship. Ellis Hanson describes queerness as “a domain virtually synonymous with homosexuality and yet wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities [that] challenge the familiar distinction between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women.”³ This chapter will cover a range of spectatorial responses that are undoubtedly perverse in their unexpected, unauthorized reception and, I argue, queer in their orientation and pleasure. In mining this reception territory, I close this chapter by moving beyond the textual to compare the mainstream and the fan reception of Linda Blair’s star image, which are alternately concerned with recapitulating or reauthoring the film to meet divergent spectatorial pleasures.

This chapter, like the last, will proceed by case study. Though I began with *Carrie* (and my unauthorized reading thereof), I will focus instead on Carrie’s equally powerful and substantially more profane sister-in-crime Regan McNeil, the enfant terrible of *The Exorcist* fame. Carrie does erupt into the text at certain key moments, however, much like her hand coming out of the grave at the close of DePalma’s film (or my hand raised in that Women’s Studies class). I will allow her that—this is Carrie’s way. Some of their other dangerous sisters—Charlie McGee of *Firestarter*, Gillian Bel-laver from *The Fury* (1978), the eponymous possessed child from Robert Wise’s *Audrey Rose* (1977), or Jennifer Corvino from Dario Argento’s *Phenomena*—might also make appearances, though in more minor roles. I will also note a handful of the imitative texts, such as the Hammer exploitation film *To the Devil a Daughter*, that sought to collect on *The Exorcist’s* substantial box-office success. This is a dangerous pubescent sorority, one