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## Here comes the antichrist: The female body as the site of exploitation and accidental resistance in the first omen

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### Abstract

This short essay offers a critical review of Arkasha Stevenson's *The First Omen*, focusing specifically on the centrality of the female body in the film's narrative action and, more specifically, how the female body emerges both as a site of exploitation and resistance in the film. The most revolting aspect of horror in this "horror film," as I demonstrate in the essay, is centred on the violence, control, and exploitation of the female body. It explores how the female characters in the novel such as Margaret and Scianna are repeatedly abused and raped within the space of the orphanage at the convent and, subsequently, their struggle for maintaining autonomy over their bodies and sexual agencies embody a resistance not only to religious appropriation of female corporeality but also, within the space of the film, the central conspiracy to facilitate the coming of the "Antichrist."

**Keywords:** Horror, religion, body, nun, motherhood

### Introduction

*The First Omen* (2024), directed by Arkasha Stevenson, is the latest instalment in the long-running and critically acclaimed *Omen* franchise inspired by the novels of David Seltzer. The film functions as a prequel to the previously released films in the series and shows how the child--the son of the devil or the Antichrist who would later be named Damien--was conceived and born. It touches upon, and combines, multiple tropes frequently present in what is broadly understood today as horror cinema, such as gothic terror, body horror, Satanism, the occult, and the supernatural. In Keeping with the series' theme, the film revolves around the Antichrist lore inspired by biblical scripture <sup>[1]</sup> where the Antichrist appears, both literally and metaphorically, as one of the greatest enemies of Christianity and the Christians. He is an evil equivalent of Jesus Christ--just as Jesus is believed to be the son of God, the Antichrist is the son of Satan. At the heart of the film's plot, however, lies a young American woman who is trying to look out for an underage orphan girl being exploited sexually at a Catholic convent and eventually finds herself caught in a sinister conspiracy that is beyond her comprehension.

Margaret (Nell Tiger Free), a young Catholic novice yet to take the habit permanently, has grown up within the care of the church since she was an orphan and never knew her parents. As she arrives in Italy to take up a job at the orphanage-cum-school for young girls at a Catholic convent, she is approached by Father Brennan (Ralph Ineson), a priest who was excommunicated for investigating the church's involvement in a sinister plot to facilitate the birth of the Antichrist on Earth so that the increasingly secular populace in twentieth century Europe has to turn back to church in the face of the chaos and evil the Antichrist would eventually cause. Father Brennan warns Margaret to keep her eyes on a young girl named Scianna, who, as Margaret discovers, is frequently locked up in the "bad room" and tortured by those in power at the orphanage. Much of the action occurs within the orphanage at the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lerner, the Antichrist lore can be found in "the first two epistles of John, the Revelation to John, and the Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians" (Lerner n.pag).

convent, where Margaret experiences a slew of ominous and sinister occurrences around Scianna and herself. Margaret is eventually convinced that Scianna is being compelled to copulate with an unknown entity (presumably the devil) and carry his child. Margaret's investigations also reveal how Scianna is being raped and forcefully impregnated repeatedly due to her inability to produce a healthy male child. Finally, the burden of carrying the child of the devil--the feared Antichrist--falls upon Margaret herself as it is revealed that she has the necessary purity of blood, which is to say, she was born as a consequence of the devil copulating with a human female. Further, she has been groomed throughout her life to fulfil this purpose if and when the need arises.

In light of the film's plot mentioned above, it might be said that the central conflict in *The First Omen* revolves around the question of female autonomy over her body and, unsurprisingly, that conflict is ultimately projected on the body of two innocent young women--first, the young teenager Scianna and, subsequently, the young novice and virginal heroine Margaret. In this sense, the film follows in the footsteps of popular horror cinema in Hollywood where the female body frequently emerges as the site of conflict between good/evil, virtue/sin, and morality/transgression. This short essay focuses on the centrality of the female body in the film's narrative action and, more specifically, explores how the female body emerges both as a site of exploitation and resistance in the film.

*The First Omen*, from the very beginning, portrays women in a state of severe physical pain, be it Scianna's restrained body or the scene of a woman giving birth at the convent hospital. The human body writhing and screaming in agony--oppressed, probed, and violated for the sake of invasive practices--not only creates a strong sense of abjection in the viewer but also foregrounds a larger thematic concern in the film by highlighting the inherent vulnerability of the female body within the space of the convent. The theme of violence and agony with respect to the female body in the film is heightened further by the suicide of Sister Angelica, a young nun who sets herself on fire in front of children as a show of devotion to the future mother of the Antichrist. This self-immolation scene is only matched in terms of its disturbing intensity by the forceful rape and impregnation of Margaret by an invisible Satan. The scene positions the body of young Margaret--grunting, panting, and gasping at the very moment of her violation--as the only subject in the frame, drawing the entirety of the viewers' attention to create the maximum intensity and, at the same time, implicate them in a complex matrix of repulsion, voyeurism, and violent fantasies. While the film liberally uses body horror<sup>[2]</sup> tropes, they are almost entirely centred on the body of women like Scianna, Angelica, and Margaret--transforming the female body not only into a site upon which grotesque monstrosities are performed but also, in the process, the female body itself is rendered into a grotesque object. The

<sup>2</sup> "The body, or biological horror genre is concerned with transforming the human form through grotesque violations of the body... Often, in mainstream slasher films and horror cinema, female bodies function as the site for such mutilations -- as a locus of fear and pain. There are long, gratuitous shots of women in peril, sexualised acts of violence, the penetrating blade of a male killer. Body horror, with its emphasis on the consciousness of terror, is able to respond to the treatment of female bodies and pain" (Jennings).

female body in agony, then, is projected as the main object to be gazed upon and consumed on-screen. Therefore, the very element of "horror" itself in *The First Omen*, like many of its predecessors in the horror genre, rests upon the female body being opened up for the viewer's gaze as an object evoking repulsion, fear, and disgust.

It might be argued that *The First Omen* participates prominently in the subgenre of films commonly referred to as "nunsplotation"--a loose term used to describe films explicitly featuring Christian, mostly Catholic, nuns in central roles, set within cloistered environments, indulging in themes generally considered taboo within Catholicism, and exploring complex issues of sex, sin, and violence. Nunsplotation films often put on the foreground the conflicts between spiritual calling and bodily desires, discipline and transgression, pious beliefs and impious actions. Part of the appeal that nunsplotation films carry emerges from, as Anton Bitel rightly suggests, the "voyeuristic" opportunity to look into the sequestered world of the nuns and the repressed sexuality of virginal, even if unattainable, women (Bitel). In this sense, *The First Omen* fits quite well into the type in terms of its setting, characters, and themes--representing another example of an overlap between nunsplotation and horror in popular cinema in recent years<sup>[3]</sup>. While cheap sensationalism has not been uncommon in nunsplotation films since it burst into the scene in European cinema in the 1970s (Carroll; Bitel; Fletcher), *The First Omen* brings the Antichrist himself into the mix as it delves into a world of corruption and conspiracies within the church. In this respect, Arkasha Stevenson follows in the footsteps of Jesus Franco, Walerian Borowczyk, and others in rendering a sacred space into an unhomey and uncanny site, highlighting the darkness, sin, and violence concealed beneath the veneer of religiosity, virtue, charity, and chastity on the surface. Behind the curtains, unbeknownst to most, the powerful members of the convent and the church carry out satanic rituals to facilitate the birth of the Antichrist through rape of Margaret and the underage Scianna. In the process, the film highlights how the convent and the orphanage, run by the brides of Christ and dedicated to Christian charity, ironically also serves as its own double and functions as a Satanic cult that undermines both the authority and the worship of Christ.

While *The First Omen* is evidently loaded with the inherent goriness that body horror frequently and predictably thrives upon, it might be argued that the horror at the heart of the film's narrative lies in equal measure in women's loss of autonomy over their own bodies. Angelica is quite literally a devil's minion who has to agree to self-immolation and meet a violent death in the process. Scianna is tortured in captivity repeatedly as her body is used to breed the devil's child. Once the true role of Margaret has been revealed in the Church's grand conspiracy, her body too becomes the site of a struggle between her efforts to maintain autonomy and the Church's attempts to impose control over it. Consequently, the suspense and horror in the film are effectively re-focused on Margaret's desperate attempts to escape her fate--one that has been ascribed to her and she

<sup>3</sup> Some recent examples of overlap between nunsplotation and horror include Aislinn Clarke's *The Devil's Doorway* (2018), Paul Hyett's *Heretiks* (2018), Corin Hardy's *The Nun* (2018), Gonzalo Calzada's *Luciferina* (2018), Mickey Reece's *Agnes* (2021), and Michael Mohan's *Immaculate* (2024).

has been groomed for throughout her life without her knowledge--which involves assuming the role of the mother against her wishes. The fact that she has been chosen to mother none other than the Antichrist intensifies the horror and disgust in Margaret as well as the viewer. Therefore, it might be argued, the film blends psychological terror with body horror and, more importantly, the two are combined around the question of female reproductive autonomy<sup>[4]</sup>.

In the film, Margaret has been portrayed as someone who, despite her professed devotion to the Church and her life as a nun, is grappling with internal conflicts regarding her imminent vows of celibacy and her sexual urges. While in a club with her flatmate and under the heavy influence of alcohol, she gives in to her physical urges and makes out with a man. However, she is filled with immense guilt and shame the next morning when she is finally sober. While the urge to deviate from the path of piety and celibacy that she has been taught to follow from her childhood is as real as the urge to answer her life's calling, Margaret is nonetheless someone who is unprepared for a life-altering event like motherhood. For Margaret--both as the novice who wants to follow her life's calling in the habit as well as a woman who wants to explore the joys and pleasures of youth, the possibility of enforced motherhood comes as a rude shock and a terrible possibility that she wants to avoid<sup>[5]</sup>. The question whether the Church is going to be successful in bringing the Antichrist to life or if the human race can be saved from the coming of the Antichrist is ultimately interpolated into the question if Margaret can evade the yoke of motherhood and, more specifically, mothering the Antichrist. In other words, the conflict around the fate of the Church, the human race, and the world at large becomes predicated directly upon the exploitation of Margaret's body. Hence, Margaret's frantic attempts to escape the Church's control is motivated by her urge to retain her physical, sexual, and reproductive autonomy as much as it is to prevent the imminent coming of the Antichrist and save humanity from the clutches of evil.

If Margaret's body is ultimately conquered by Satan and used to birth his son, Scianna's body is the site of unconscious and accidental resistance to the Church's efforts to impose control. While Scianna's body is exploited repeatedly in the same way Margaret's body would be later in the film, in its inability to offer a healthy male child it emerges as a body that cannot be fully controlled for the purpose it is meant to serve. Even though Scianna herself does not regain any autonomy or agency over her own body while she is being tortured and raped, through the accidental resistance her body performs, she emerges as a participant influencing the outcome of the evil machinations at the convent and, ultimately, her own life after she manages to escape with Margaret. This resistance, however, is defined by a "lack"--namely, the inability to produce healthy male offspring. Therefore, the film posits a peculiar problem where the only way for a woman to resist efforts to exert control on her body appears to rest on the negation of one of the most significant female functions attributed to her by patriarchal norms.

Hence, it might be said that there are two facets to the film's treatment of the female body. On the one hand, while Margaret's rape and impregnation are horrifyingly literal and real, they also take on a symbolic dimension since they stand for the ultimate denial and repression of female agency and control over her body. This, once again, situates *The First Omen* with the long tradition of horror films such as Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and David Fincher's *Alien*<sup>3</sup> (1992) that locate the protagonists' sense of fear, disgust, and abjection with, firstly, female anxiety pertaining to pregnancies, and secondly, the possibility of giving birth to monstrous progeny. Moreover, the film also testifies to the cultural moment that produced it--a time fraught by the increasingly polarised pro-life/pro-choice debates in recent years--as it relocates the question of evil in relation to the question of female reproductive/sexual autonomy. On the other hand, the film also presents a scenario where the female body, and the female agency over her body, resists being subsumed completely by external control and domination.

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<sup>4</sup> "...right of a woman to make decisions concerning her fertility and sexuality free of coercion and violence" (Shalev).

<sup>5</sup> Historically, motherhood has been a central point of concern in horror cinema's exploration of femininity and the portrayal of female subjects. See Sarah Arnold and Barbara Creed for reference.