

**“There’s Something Wrong with *Orphan*”**  
**A Review of Collett-Serra’s *Orphan* (2009)**  
by Kathleen Miller

Jaume Collet-Serra’s new film *Orphan* (2009), released by Warner Brothers Pictures, explores the familiar territory of the psycho-child thriller, joining earlier examples such as *The Bad Seed* (1956), *The Omen* (1976), and *The Good Son* (1993). And despite participating in such a well-established horror film tradition, director Collet-Serra and his screenwriters, David Johnson and Alex Mace, manage to squeeze new blood from an old cinematic stone by offering a disturbing, albeit unique, twist on the traditional evil-child plot. In their attempt, however, both to revitalize and to distance themselves from this genre, they offer a plot development so ridiculous that, while it may initially provoke laughter at the filmmakers’ ability to strain credulity, it will also leave many viewers disappointed, frustrated, and angered by their shameless reliance on harmful prejudices and dangerous stereotypes about disabled children.

*Orphan* tells the story of a couple devastated by the loss of their unborn child. In order to cope with their grief, Kate and John Coleman (played by Vera Farmiga and Peter Sarsgaard) decide to transfer the love they felt for their stillborn daughter to an adopted child. While visiting the St. Mariana School for Girls, they meet, and are immediately taken with, a Russian orphan named Esther (Isabelle Furhman), a self-possessed, polite, and artistic nine-year-old. Kate and John adopt and bring her home to become part of the Coleman family, where Esther joins their two biological children, Daniel (Jimmy Bennett) and Max (Aryana Engineer).

Daniel greets his new sister with a mixture of jealousy and fascination. He is bewildered by her “difference,” for she speaks with an accent, wears peculiar black ribbons around her neck and wrists, and affects distinctly un-childlike manner(ism)s. On the other hand, Max, who is hearing impaired (and therefore a little “different” herself), becomes a fast ally of Esther’s, after Esther learns sign language. Esther’s adoptive parents have similarly antithetical reactions to her—John is clearly enamored, while Kate’s feelings are slightly more ambiguous, as she begins to observe troubling inconsistencies in the girl’s behavior and disturbing occurrences that happen to others while in Esther’s proximity. For example, a child who bullies Esther winds up falling on the playground and breaking her leg, while the nun who supervised her adoption ends up brutally beaten. Kate begins to suspect Esther of foul play, but her husband and her doctor do not believe her, because of her own history of alcohol abuse and her crippling sadness over the loss of her stillborn daughter. Desperate to protect her biological children, Kate relentlessly investigates the secret of Esther’s past, which culminates in the aforementioned shocking plot twist and the sadistically violent, bloody dénouement.

While most B-list horror movies do not inspire much in the way of moral approbation or indignation, *Orphan* has received very mixed critical reviews and outraged audiences, particularly through the film’s representation of the figure of the orphaned child. In her *Washington Post* review, Ann Hornaday has called *Orphan* a “depraved worthless piece of filth” and a “rank piece of exploitation” whose only merit rests in the performances of the film’s three young stars. On the other hand, Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times* has given *Orphan* the high-praise of three-and-a-half stars, before conceding that the film *might* have offended someone like his former longtime film reviewing partner, the late Gene Siskel, who would have expressed displeasure at the film’s exploitation of children and child actors (Siskel would have

been right to voice concern. In *Orphan*, children are routinely the victims of violence or the perpetrators of malice, and the script flirts blatantly with pedophilia).

At the center of the controversy over the film's exploitative images of children is its portrayal of adoption. Numerous adoption agencies expressed concern over *Orphan* even before its release, inspiring Warner Brothers' executives to eliminate the line "It must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own" from the film's trailer. Some agencies went so far as to urge a boycott. And in a letter to Warner Brothers, U. S. senators Mary Landrieu, Tom Coburn, and James Inhofe, along with three members of the House of Representatives, Michele Bachmann, John Boozman, and Danny Davis, voiced their fears that the film would discourage people from adopting children (especially minors from foreign countries) and promote a negative attitude toward adoption. Perhaps in response to all this controversy, the film proved fairly successful at the box office, opening fourth, on July 24, 2009, behind *G-Force*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and *The Ugly Truth*. During its opening weekend, it grossed over twelve million dollars domestically—a strong return, particularly as it competed with big-budget summer blockbusters such as *Harry Potter*.

Given the amount of attention it has garnered, one may wonder why *Orphan* in particular, rather than "sibling" films such as *The Good Son*, has raised such concern about the way children are being portrayed. As David Lopate aptly puts the matter in "Images of Children in Films" (1995), children have historically "not fared well in films" (90). He writes, "Too often, each child is made to stand for the Child, and to reflect the filmmaker's globally positive, warm, or hostile feelings toward this minority" (90); hence, *Orphan's* troubling depiction of children is nothing new. Lopate identifies five common pitfalls in representing the child figure in film, with children ranging from innocent victims, to monsters, to adult transvestites (90-91). And while *Orphan* manages to include a dizzying array of these child stereotypes, quickly alternating between images of imperiled minors and a murderous woman-child, I believe these figures, and the film's strong anti-adoption rhetoric, only begin to hint at *Orphan's* most offensive and troubling message(s).

When Warner Brothers' publicity for the film abandoned its original anti-adoption tagline, it substituted the supposedly less controversial "There's something wrong with Esther." Uncovering what is "wrong" with Esther is at the heart of *Orphan*; however, this new advertising pitch does little more than transfer the film's source of anxiety to a new locus of horror by emphasizing and making acceptable an alternative (sub)text of prejudice in *Orphan*. In fact, I contend that the film is at its most horrifying when it details this other element of what is "wrong" with Esther: not her status as an adoptee, but rather her "difference" as a child with disabilities. In the case of both Esther and the deaf character, Max, issues of acceptable and unacceptable difference, monstrosity, and dis/ability play out, disturbingly, on the bodies of female children.

Mary Klages, Martha Stoddard Holmes, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson have all noted that historically, as a literary trope, disability has signaled pathos, inferiority, weakness, vulnerability, and monstrosity, as well as barriers to romance. Furthermore, the presence of disability in gothic or horror texts, such as *Orphan*, is nothing new. Scholarly texts such as Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), H.L. Malchow's *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1996), and Carol Margaret Davison's *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature* (2004) all offer discussions of racial and

sexual difference in the gothic genre, where they are configured as signs of monstrosity and inhumanity. And although Rosemarie Garland-Thomson demonstrates that depictions of disability in fiction have altered significantly over time, largely for the good, *Orphan* shows us that discomfort with, and discrimination against, disabled bodies continues well into the twenty-first century.

In *Orphan* both female children, Esther and Max, are disabled. Even though Max (and viewers) do not yet know about Esther's various mental and physical disabilities, their mutual status as "other" (hearing impaired and orphaned) helps to solidify their relationship as sisters. Through its decision to disable only its women characters, *Orphan* helps to perpetuate a long history of misogynist writing about the female body, dating back to Classical Greece. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that in the fourth book of his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle holds up a masculine "generic type" against which all physical variation appears as different, derivative, inferior, and insufficient. This establishes the Western tradition of viewing woman as a "diminished man," one who is monstrous, and this is the first step on a "path to deviance" (19). *Orphan* projects this anxiety about female deficiency onto the bodies of young girls, particularly onto the "tween" body of Esther, a girl on the cusp of adolescence and transition into "monstrous" womanhood.

While *Orphan* initially establishes some similarity between Esther and Max as disabled characters, it goes on to offer an even more troubling juxtaposition of their differences. Max is hearing impaired, and her disability is visible; she wears hearing aids and communicates through a mixture of lip reading and sign language. Esther, on the contrary, has multiple disabilities, all of which are invisible or hidden. Describing the exact nature of Esther's disabilities in full would spoil the film's ending for potential viewers. Suffice it to say, therefore, that *Orphan* differs from many gothic texts, for at no point does its screenplay suggest that Esther's evil, or her "difference," has supernatural origins. Instead, Esther's immorality and violence arise from her emotional disabilities. Kate attributes Esther's murderous rage to an invisible psychological disability, such as being a "character disturbed" child or having an "antisocial personality disorder." The film uses these illnesses as a form of shorthand, to account quickly for Esther's motivations. In the world of *Orphan*, individuals with psychiatric disorders are dangerous, amoral, and potentially homicidal. Although Max's visible disability, which clearly marks her as "other," may be acceptable, Esther's invisible disabilities are unacceptable and sinister, terrifying in their unknowability.

*Orphan* does not, of course, entirely demonize disability. Max does wind up as a powerful disabled child figure. In fact, she proves to be more able-bodied than her brother and mother, saving their lives on numerous occasions. In many ways, she is the heroine of *Orphan*. And while the film does not go so far as to suggest that her hearing impairment makes Max hyper-able, some elements of the plot do hinge on her ability to communicate silently, her knowledge of lip-reading, and her keen observational skills. It was heartening to see the deaf character play a significant role here and embody a child prototype not mentioned in Paul Lopate's analysis—the child as hero/ine.

Although she is disabled, the character of Max also conforms to many conventional standards of Western acceptability and ability—she is white, blonde, cute, middle-class, and the biological daughter of the Colemans. If Max gets to be a disabled heroine, she does so only while remaining within multiple parameters of perceived cultural "normalcy." On the other hand,

Esther, the foreign-born, dark-haired, “unnatural” stranger remains monstrous. With its xenophobia and general lack of acceptance of difference, *Orphan* offers an insensitive, stereotypical, and sensational depiction of disabled children, while associating them, moreover, with the hot-button political issue of immigration. Ultimately, although there may be something wrong with Esther, there is far more wrong with *Orphan*, a film that teaches audiences that “difference” is horrific.

### Works Cited

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Davison, Carol Margaret. *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. London: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Klages, Mary. *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Lopate, Paul. “Images of Children in Films.” *Green Mountains Review* 8.1 (1995): 90-96.
- Malchow, H.L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Orphan*. Dir. Jaume Collet-Serra. Perf. Vera Farmiga, Peter Saarsgard, Isabelle Furhman. Dark Castle Entertainment and Warner Brothers Pictures, 2009.
- Stoddard Holmes, Martha. *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- The Bad Seed*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perfs. Nancy Kelley, Patty McCormack, Henry Jones. Warner Brothers, 1956.
- The Good Son*. Dir. Joseph Ruben. Perfs. Macaulay Culkin, Elijah Wood, Wendy Crewson. Twentieth Century Fox Productions, 1993.
- The Omen*. Dir. Richard Donner. Perfs. Gregory Peck, Lee Remick, Harvey Stephens. Twentieth Century Fox Productions, 1976.