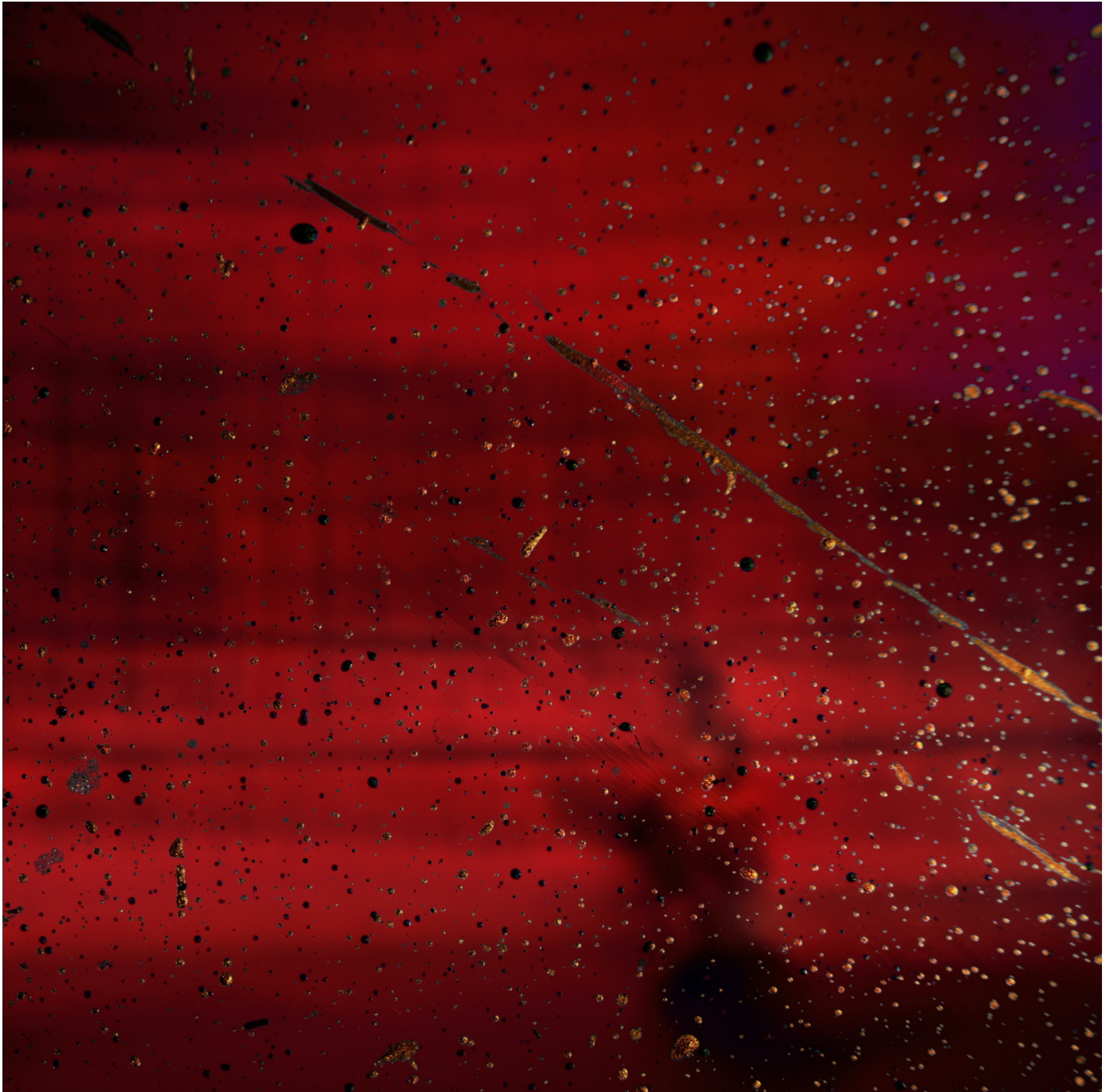




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# Why is Satan Such a Sissy?

## An Exploration of the “Flaming Devil” Trope in Children’s Animation

Zachary Doiron

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### Abstract

In the 1990s, effeminate, flamboyant, and predatory villains populated the screens of many children’s animated movies and TV shows. While this trope, often titled the “sissy villain,” has received some scholarly attention, a lesser-known subset of this cliché has been completely ignored. This essay offers an analysis of the “Flaming Devil” trope, which describes the various portrayals of the Devil as a queer-coded character. Starting with an exploration of the two most popular Flaming Devils, *The Powerpuff Girls’* HIM and *Hercules’* Hades, this essay will argue that this specific trope can only make sense in the larger cultural and political context of 1990s’ United States. On the one hand, the framing of the Devil as a villain comes from the nationwide satanic panic and turn-of-the-millennium foreign policy, which saw the Devil as one of the states’ greatest enemy. The inherent sexual and queer-coded nature of the trope, on the other hand, comes from the anti-gay and sex negative rhetoric, which is primarily understood in Protestant terms. Put together, characters embodying the Flaming Devil trope, such as HIM and Hades, are designed to associate queerness with the Devil, which in turn, demonizes queer people.

Keywords: devil, children’s media, popular culture, queer, American evangelicalism, villains

In 2017, Jeff Mateer, a President Donald Trump judicial nominee, attacked queer people by saying he openly discriminated against them and believed that transgender children were “part of Satan’s plan.”<sup>1</sup> This controversial statement revealed, yet again, a long-standing evangelical Christian narrative that associates queerness with satanism and the Devil. Historically, the marginalized have always been associated with religious creatures from the Devil to the Antichrist. Queer people have not been excluded; conservative evangelical

Christians are often the ones waging these attacks on queer people with the hope of saving their souls from being damned to hell. This narrative of associating queerness with evil is a cliché that is often found in films and TV series, especially in children’s animation. Villains from *The Little Mermaid* to *Pokemon* are examples of children’s media that exposes kids to queer coded villains in their childhood. This cliché is so common that it earned its own title: “the Sissy Villain.” Coined by Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe, this archetype is employed when a villain’s queerness is seen in their design, costume, props, body language, activities, and dialogue.<sup>2</sup> A surprising sub-section of this trope, the “Flaming Devil,” emerged during the late 1990s, and it has been largely ignored by scholars.<sup>3</sup> Appearing in a handful of children’s films and series, the “Flaming Devil” archetype is a reoccurring motif found in media where the figure of the Devil is portrayed as flamboyant, effeminate, and gender fluid. His gender transgression is often marked by a sly, predatory, and villainous behaviour that is both frightening and discomfiting for the supposed heterosexual viewer. The two characters that will serve as the starting point in this discussion are the most popular depictions of this archetype: HIM in the Cartoon Network’s *The Powerpuff Girls* and Hades in Disney’s *Hercules*. Although these films are not explicitly Christian, understanding this trope requires reading the “Flaming Devil” in the context of the turn-of-the-millennium American evangelical apocalyptic thinking and Protestant-based purity culture. While the villainous nature of the characters of HIM and Hades should be understood in the climate of the 1990s satanic panic, these characters’ queerness should be read through the decade’s Protestant-based anti-gay culture. Together, the figure of the Devil becomes an avenue to demonize queer people by associating the Devil, who is imagined as being

one of the United States' biggest threats, to stereotypical queer signifiers.

## The “Flaming Devil” Trope: The Powerpuff Girls, Hercules, and the Queer Portrayal of the Devil

Like most animated villains in the 1990s, *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Hercules* rely on the “Sissy Villain” trope that portrays their villains in a stereotypically queer manner. The “Sissy Villains” often transgress their perceived gender norms by engaging in frantic and abrupt switches between feminine and masculine qualities. Tania Sharmin and Sanyat Sattar highlight that “many of the female Disney villains are subtly masculine—their faces, body shape, and behavior lend “mannish” traits to their characters” and male villains “are given feminine traits—some bordering on an implicit homosexual characterization.”<sup>4</sup> The term “Sissy Villain” can also point to being an umbrella term for other queer coded villains, or, in other words, villains that embody gay stereotypes without explicitly stating their sexuality. The “Flaming Devil” trope, which is often viewed as a subset of the “Sissy Villain”, highlights the association of the Devil with campy, effeminate and stereotypically gay mannerisms or style. The homosexuality is never explicit, but the implication is always clearly demonstrated to the viewer.

One of the most brazen example of the “Flaming Devil” archetype comes from the *Powerpuff Girls* episode titled “Octi Evil,” where the viewers are introduced to the ultimate villain of the series, an androgynous devilish type character called simply by the masculine pronoun “HIM.”<sup>5</sup> Like all *Powerpuff Girls*’ supervillains, HIM’s design tells the viewers exactly what they need to know about the character’s sexual deviancy. Drawn in a

triangular aesthetics, HIM wears knee high black boots with Santa Claus-looking lingerie. His face is covered in drag-style makeup, topped with black lipstick, blush and black eye liner.<sup>6</sup> While all these design choices point to a certain femininity, his name points to the figure being masculine. For example, HIM’s features include a prominent traditionally male signifier: facial hair on his chin. In addition, HIM is also voiced by Tom Kane, a straight male actor, whose voice work emphasizes the character’s gender transgression by constantly fluctuating between a soft and high feminine falsetto and an angry masculine deep voice. Furthermore, HIM’s mannerisms read as quite flamboyant, feminine, sexual and ultimately, predatory. All these aspects of HIM suggest a queer coded villain and one that could very much fit with the popular “Sissy Villain” cliché at the time. Unlike traditional “sissy villains,” HIM appears as a stereotypical Devil with his red skin and yellow eyes. He also lives in what the series calls “The Underworld” and he is emphatically nicknamed the “King of Darkness,” a title commonly associated to the Christian Devil. Therefore, HIM’s characteristics serve to emphasize the archetype of the “Flaming Devil.”

In 1997’s *Hercules*, Disney, a company well-known for their decadent and campy “sissy villains,” introduced its own “Flaming Devil” in Hades, the “God of the Underworld” and the main villain of the film. At first glance, Hades’ design is not as queer as other Disney villains or even *Powerpuff Girls*’ HIM, yet his stereotypical queerness lies in his effeminate mannerisms, sassy dialogue, and decadent activities. While Hades’ costume can reflect the historical clothing of the Roman times, it can also be read as feminine given its long robe-like appearance.<sup>7</sup> What truly reinforces Hades’ “Flaming Devil” trope is his flamboyant mannerisms and sassy dialogue.<sup>8</sup> An example of Hades’ mannerism occurs in one scene where Hades is seen lounging with a cocktail



in his hand. His posture in this instance gives off a sort of sassiness that has become associated with his character, as well as reinforces a certain effeminacy.<sup>9</sup> A notable example of his sassy dialogue in the *Hercules* series occurs when Hades sings a musical number that only reinforces his gay stereotypes. He sings, in an effeminate manner, that “the Parthenon, that crowning jewel, could use my flair for urban renewal . . . I’m just kidding, I wouldn’t change a thing!”<sup>10</sup> Queer theorist Will Letts point out that “[h]is God of the Underworld persona sits incongruously with the role of a designer/decorator, making the juxtaposition quite a queer one.”<sup>11</sup> All of these are demonstrated by YouTuber Lindsay Ellis, in her review of the film, who called Hades “Meg’s bitchy gay boyfriend,” which perfectly summarizes Hades’ queer coded persona.<sup>12</sup> Similar to HIM, Hades communicates a certain gender transgression where he goes from the feminine and sassy pale blue flamed persona to the angry and masculine red flamed persona. In addition, Hades also lives in “The Underworld” and his design is done in a devilish manner with his flaming head, yellow eyes and ghostly appearance. While these Devil characters might seem very different on the surface, at their core, they share similar designs and ideas.

Often, when the “Flaming Devil” makes an appearance, it is usually in more adult-oriented animated series, such as *Futurama* or *South Park*; the trope emphasizes the character’s sexual transgressions and their flamboyant dialogue and mannerisms only plays into campy gay stereotypes, which is surprising considering children’s media’s obsession with conservative “family values.” However, these portrayals of the Devil, especially in children’s animation, do make sense when juxtaposed to the portrayal of the Devil throughout history and the larger cultural and political landscape of the United States at the turn-of-the-millennium.

## The Red Adversary: The Devil as Enemy of the United States

From the beginning of the United States’ history, the Devil had always been one of the nation’s reoccurring threats. During the infamous Salem witch trials, the Devil was strongly associated to sexuality and femininity, especially since women were often accused of having sexual encounters with the Devil and entering his “pact.” These sexual encounters with the Devil were often described as “virtual rape” as the Devil took hold of their bodies in a sexual possession.<sup>13</sup> The “witches” were thus labelled sexual deviants and extremely dangerous people that needed to be burned at the stake. The sexual aspect of the witch trial era is definitely seen in modern day depictions of the Devil in children’s animation; both Hades and HIM are explicitly sexual creatures as they caress, lick, kiss, and maneuver their bodies in sexual manners, especially alongside their enemies. These sexual acts are constructed in ways that make them dangerous, mysterious, and predatory. In “Tough Love,” HIM is seen caressing and licking a brainwashed Professor Utonium in a scene that is quite sexually suggestive.<sup>14</sup> Similar events happen in *Hercules*, when Hades tickles Hercules’ chin and caresses his muscular arms.<sup>15</sup> While there is a sexual deviancy present in these acts, there is also a certain gender transgression that is at the heart of these depictions that is not seen in the witch trials. In these films and television shows, the villains act in a very stereotypically homosexualized manner by being campy, effeminate and predatory. The Devil, as understood throughout history, has, for the most part, been portrayed as a heterosexual figure, even when he is at its most sexual. In the 1990s, the Devil resurfaced as a threat with the rise of the “satanic panic,” which strengthened the connection between the Devil and queerness.

During the infamous “satanic panic” of the 80s and 90s, the Devil had become associated to many secular ideals such as Hollywood films, and popular culture in general. Although popular culture and evangelical Christianity were not often as closely related until late twenty first century, evangelicals today are more prone to participate in and consume Christian-made popular culture. In the 1920s, evangelicals denounced Hollywood films as corrupting the Christian morality of Americans.<sup>16</sup> As an example of this popularity, *PureFlix*, an evangelical film studio, who created such films as *God’s Not Dead* and the infamous anti-abortion film, *Unplanned*, have successfully created mainstream evangelical films putting emphasis on evangelical culture and morality.<sup>17</sup> The evangelical’s reclamation of popular culture can be drawn back to the satanic panic, an American phenomenon where anxieties about Devil worshippers ran rampant. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, sexually abusive Devil worshippers were one of the biggest threats to the American way of life. As popular culture became more readily available, evangelicals and charismatic Christians became convinced that Satan was among them and ready to prey on children and teenagers. Many different aspects, such as heavy metal music, horror films, and the popularity of the board game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, all perfectly aligned to create this idea of the Devil incarnate. Looking back ten years prior, in 1970, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* was a best-selling book telling the story of the coming of apocalypse by heavily relying on figures such as the Devil and the Antichrist. The popularity of such a book successfully sowed the necessary seeds for the satanic panic in popular culture discourse. While evangelical Christians accused different individuals of Devil worshipping and satanic ritual abuse (SRA), the McMartin trial represented the extreme culmination of such beliefs. Still the longest trial in American history,

the McMartin trial, which ran from 1984 to 1990, investigated SRA allegations against daycare workers, Virginia McMartin and Raymond Buckey. The accusers stated that their children had been molested by the daycare workers in a satanic underground lair.<sup>18</sup> Today, evidence points toward the trial being corrupted by leading questions from police officers, the over-saturation of satanic imagery in the media, and the mental condition of the main accuser. Even today, there has never been any evidence that confirms the existence of SRA.<sup>19</sup> Historian of horror pop culture W. Scott Poole suggests that the satanic panic was a fear of a perceived attack on middle class American values that is perpetuated by popular culture and popular religion.<sup>20</sup> These values for an evangelical Christian audience would no doubt include the so-called “family values,” which condemned homosexuality and queerness.

The satanic panic showed that the Devil was believed to be living among everyday Americans and the only solution was for Christians to come together and solve America’s greatest threat. During such event, the Devil became the United States’ greatest enemy and had to be defeated. The ideas of a Devil incarnate mixed with conservative ideas towards sexuality and queerness surely set the stage for characters such as HIM and Hades. While the fight against Satan shifted from domestic to abroad, it is important to look at the Christian Right and their impact on the political landscape of the turn-of-the-millennium. The characters of HIM and Hades can only start to make sense in this socio-political era.



## Devil Worshippers and Demon Hunters: The Anti-Gay Politics of the Turn-of-the-Millennium

In January 17, 1998, a bombshell accusation arose between the then President of the United States, Bill Clinton, and White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The accusation included Clinton having a sexual encounter with Lewinsky in the Oval Office. This infamous White House blowjob angered many evangelicals, not for Clinton's blatant abuse of power but for his adulterous relationship, lack of decency, and provocativeness. It was the act of sex outside marriage that eventually had evangelicals calling it the return of Sodom and Gomorrah, a biblical location commonly associated to sexual sins.<sup>21</sup> Why did a conversation about sex in the White House quickly turned into a religious matter? Scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have also asked this question in their book, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. Looking into this bizarre association, they explain that:

The secular state's interest in regulating sexuality is an interest in maintaining religious — specifically Christian — authority. In cases concerning homosexuality, the Court refers directly to Christian religious tradition to support its position. The direct appeal to religion is all the more remarkable because the government does not fall back on religion as its primary rationale except when it comes to sex.<sup>22</sup>

While Clinton's sexual impropriety eventually resulted in his impeachment, the turn-of-the-millennium cultural and political landscape was specifically obsessed with sexual heteronormativity and purity and any

conversation about sex quickly turned into a conversation about Christian morality.

In the midst of the scandal, the Christian Right was waging a war against the “decline of family values.” They rejected anything that could possibly damage the traditional heterosexual American family from popular music to outright pro-gay policies. Although their political lobbying efforts delivered mixed results, their tactics were nowhere short of innovative. The idea was to appropriate popular cultural and trendy activities and give them a Christian make-over. One such practice has been to create Christian sex manuals. Contrary to popular beliefs, evangelicals have always been implicated in sexual culture and concerns. Amy DeRogatis, author of “What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation: Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present,” explains that evangelicals have created many sex manuals that advocate safe sexual relations within the confines of the Bible and the Protestant Christ.<sup>23</sup> These manuals always advocate for heterosexual sex and any queer approaches to sexual activity is strictly condemned. Similarly, Evangelicals started creating Christian Halloween haunted houses, known as Hell Houses, to warn teenagers and families of the ramifications of participating in queer sexual activities. This conversion tactic quickly grew in popularity and became a controversial practice for plenty of reasons, but mostly for its graphic and exaggerated depiction of abortions and its harmful and offensive anti-gay rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> In each of the theatrical scenes, the Devil cunningly manipulates and convinces its victims to engage in different sinful acts, reinforcing the satanic panic idea of the Devil's worldly presence. In the infamous anti-gay scenes, the Devil is either waiting for an HIV positive gay individual to die in his hospital bed, or he plays the role of a “priest” marrying a gay couple.<sup>25</sup> In either instances, the presence of the Devil in these

scenes communicates that not only is being gay or queer sinful, but that it is part of a grander satanic plan. This, again, provides incentives to associate the figure of the Devil with stereotypical queerness, as seen in these Hell Houses. With the Christian Right movement, Evangelicals were able to reinforce traditionalist “family values” in a language more palpable to teens and children: popular culture.

Looking abroad to the United States’ foreign policy, the idea of the “gay agenda” and the Devil continued to thrive, especially at the turn-of-the-millennium with the presidency of George W. Bush and the “war on terror.” At this time, homophobic apocalyptic discourses were amplified on a national stage. Religious scholar Erin Runions states that during the early 2000s, the enemy becomes “terrorism” in general and localized in the figure of Saddam Hussein. However, Saddam Hussein also becomes characterized as a homosexualized Antichrist, the main enemy of the United States’ “war on terror.”<sup>26</sup> While it may be bizarre that these two things become associated together, Runions further explains that “if sexual and civic desire must line up with the apocalyptic narrative of the nation and humanity, those considered to be outside of the narrative are represented through non-normative sexual desire.”<sup>27</sup> Runions demonstrates that the enemy of the United States must be on the margins of society, therefore, they must act in ways that are not from the homeland (such as homosexuality), they exude a certain jealousy of the state, and most importantly, they are localized in a fictionalized setting of Babylon. In the “war on terror,” Iraq becomes the embodiment of Babylon and thus, violent revenge becomes directed unto this location. Violence and torture directed at Iraq citizens are justified, according to Runions, as biblical allegories become the truth.<sup>28</sup>

Bush’s foreign policy ideas were not only implemented abroad but provided the framework for some popular culture, such as the character of the Devil in *South Park*. In the film, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, the figure of the Devil is shown as the effeminate gay lover of Saddam Hussein, a depiction that only makes sense in the political and social context of the Bush era.<sup>29</sup> Runions explains that the portrayal comes from “the longstanding designation of the political enemy as Babylonian Antichrist, the most recent conservative Christian belief that the Antichrist is likely to be homosexual, and the orientalist imagination about Muslim men’s sexuality that is central to popular depictions of terrorists.”<sup>30</sup> Like *South Park*, *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Hercules*, while not explicitly Christian media, can only make sense in their respective religio-political context. Runions’ analysis of turn-of-the-millennium politics can also be seen in the characters of HIM and Hades. For an example, both are localized as being abroad and outside of a western setting. Both are contextualized in a vaguely described “Underworld,” which is reminiscent of the imagined Babylonian locale. Both also have a certain obsession and jealousy with the “good” and “normative” land. Their ultimate goal is to possess that land and if they are unable then they must destroy it at all cost. To achieve this plan, they must both kill the main heroes, who serve as guardians of their respective state. At the beginning of *Hercules*, Hades is ridiculed by the other gods, which prompts him to want to kill Hercules and take over Olympus. In *The Powerpuff Girls*, HIM must kill the three heroines in order to capture the world. Just as Runions showcases through *South Park*’s depiction of the Devil, *Hercules* and *The Powerpuff Girls* mimic real understanding of United States foreign policy and the reciprocity between popular culture and politics. These various examples can also be read as examples of the “terroristic” discourse espoused by evangelicals and often

associated to figures like Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein.

As the above illustrates, secular understandings of sexuality and sexual culture in the United States derive from Protestant evangelicalism. The anxiety surrounding sex, homosexuality and foreign countries only make sense in evangelical apocalyptic thinking of the 1990s. When this way of thinking becomes standardized and normalized through the socio-political, these ideas start to seep out of evangelical thinking and into secular aspects of society, more specifically popular culture. Therefore, it makes sense that the figure of the Devil becomes associated with both villainy and queerness. However, the question remains: why children's media?

### **Big Bad (Gay) Guys: Hays Code, Disney, and the Gender Transgression of Villains**

Since the beginning of film making, gender deviant and transgressive villains have been a commonly employed cliché. This employment can be traced back to the infamous Hays Code, a set of rules introduced in 1934 by Joseph Breen to force movies to appeal to Judeo-Christian values, in which “perverse” and anti-religious subjects, such as homosexuality and interracial marriages, could not be broadcasted. In such a climate, the term “queer coding” became associated to characters who embodied queer stereotypes without self-identifying as queer.<sup>31</sup> Although the Hays Code was eventually replaced by the less conservative and current *Motion Picture Association of America* (MPAA) rating system, “queer coding” still persisted. While many film studios participated in the demonization of queer people, Disney has and still is a primary culprit of queer coding. Most recently, *Frozen* has been accused of such offence as the main hero, Elsa, is portrayed as a person that feels

alienated by the world because for her inability to control her ice powers. Many saw her situation, where her parents demands her to suppress her powers, as a metaphor for ‘being in the closet, a popular term used to indicate the experience of hiding one’s sexuality. On top of that, Elsa is specifically written without a romantic interest in the film, leading many to interpret her as queer. A viral Twitter campaign was even started to push the creators to make Elsa a lesbian by giving her a female love interest in *Frozen*’s upcoming sequel. The goal was to put enough pressure on Disney to right their harmful legacy towards queer people.<sup>32</sup> In the end, after hundreds of written articles on the matter, and with the stars of the film voicing their support, Disney’s *Frozen II* included nothing of such. While the ability to create and showcase queer characters are no longer illegal, the legacy of queer coding in American cinema remains a popular trope, especially in blockbuster filmmaking.

While queer coding still persists today, the worst offences come from Disney’s 1990s vault of films, commonly called the “Disney Renaissance,” in which many of Disney’s villains were coded as being queer. Jafar’s effeminate voice, Governor Ratcliffe’s sparkly dress, and Ursula’s campy drag musical number all perpetuate gay and queer stereotypes. Unfortunately, these queer depictions are often shallow and these characters are targets of destruction and ridicule by the film’s heroes. Many have noticed the blatant queer coding in Disney villains and while representation of queerness is not in and of itself bad, Disney choosing to only portray their villains as queer and their heroes as heterosexual creates a binary normative view of gender that signals queerness as “evil” or “bad”. Gender and pop culture scholar Amanda Putnam explains how juxtaposing these two only reinforces the heteronormative culture:

However, it is the noxious combination of transgendered characteristics with these characters' evil plots and exploits that makes this spicy blend so unpalatable once clearly recognized—and yet, that combination goes unrealized by most viewers, whether child or adult—accepted without examination, reinforcing the heterosexism of current contemporary culture.<sup>33</sup>

Putnam highlights the problematic nature of Disney's heterosexist agenda and what it communicates to children. Her use of the term “transgendered characteristic” to explain the gender transgressing of the villains is a problematic one. All these scholars touch upon the very important fluctuation in gender characteristics that happens to Disney villains, but gender transgression would be a better term to explain this observation. This term, which harbours a specifically negative connotation, captures not only the essence of Putnam's and the other scholars' observation of the villains' sudden and constant shifts between femininity and masculinity, but also the ways Disney characterize their villains.

The “Sissy Villain” archetype becomes yet another tactic for discriminating against queer folk in a culture already dominated by anti-gay sentiment. Disney's villains, and the villains of other children's animation's, became queer characters because their queerness was a cultural sign that was often associated to “bad” people. The “Flaming Devil” trope is often seen as a subset of the “Sissy Villain” primarily because of their shared demonization of queer people. The popularity of the “Sissy Villain” cliché already normalized the campy gay aesthetic as evil. The given anti-gay cultural movement of the 1990s is a direct influence on the creators of these films and TV series, even if not explicit. At the same time,

the decision to include satanic villains in children's media was influenced by the satanic panic and turn-of-the-millennium politics, which constructed the worldly presence of the Devil. In the final section, I would like to highlight exactly what the consequences and impact of the “Flaming Devil” archetype are.

## **What if Queer Satan is Good?: The Impact of Children's Media on Kids**

One of the crucial questions that comes into play in these discussions is whether or not children truly understand the construction of gender performances. While academics thoroughly analyze these films, popular understanding of children suggests that they are viewers who passively watch moving pictures on a screen. The content and meaning of these images are thought to be completely lost on children and exist purely to entertain the parent that need to accompany them. However, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe point to several different psychological experiments where children are actively developing gender schemata that are associated with gender stereotypes showed in children's media. They state that “children may be more vulnerable to the implicit messages about acceptable versus gender deviant performance because they are drawn to a genre that is rife with strongly gendered messages.”<sup>34</sup> Not only do children learn from the media that they consume but they also have a certain control over which media they choose to engage with. They are “drawn to a genre,” which suggests that children are not merely passively watching media but actively consuming it. Speaking to this point, queer studies scholar Jack Halberstam brilliantly illustrates how children's animated films are complex and meaningful. By looking at the “Pixarvolt films,” he shows that animated movies aimed at children are constructed

in ways that emphasize and highlight childhood experience:

The Pixarvolt films, unlike their unrevolting conventional animation counterparts, seem to know that their main audience is children, and they seem to also know that children do not invest in the same things that adults invest in: children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death or failure, they are collective creatures, they are in a constant state of rebellion against their parents, and they are not the masters of their domain.<sup>35</sup>

To highlight this point Halberstam points to films like *Chicken Run*, where the chickens revolt against their greedy and abusive owners, or *Over the Hedge*, where various animals attack wealthy capitalists destroying their homes.<sup>36</sup> All these examples show that children actively consume media and are drawn to titles that specifically cater to their experiences and interests, which should apply to their gender and/or sexual identity as well.

It is also important to highlight that queer people have reclaimed many queer coded villains and are now regarded as positive characters for the community. As with every art form, watching films and TV series can be a personal experience and the messages viewers get from them is widely varied. Many queer people choose to watch Disney movies with a positive and queer interpretation. According to an anonymous gay writer, his perception of Scar from *The Lion King* has dramatically affected him:

As a young gay child I didn't register any of this explicitly. Scar's "weak" and "effeminate" persona being demonized appear true to my

experiences as a queer child navigating masculinity in the playground...Yet, now as a 20 year old man, I absolutely adore this representation of Scar, and have been able to reimagine him as a sort of anti-hero championing resistance to traditional masculinity.<sup>37</sup>

Reclaiming these queer coded characters not only show the deep lack of positive queer characters in popular culture but how such characters impact queer individuals.

Today, there have been strides towards positive queer character depictions in children's media. *Steven Universe's* Garnet, whose character is the embodiment of a lesbian couple, has garnered much support from the LGBTQ community. *The Legend of Korra* became the first children's TV series to star a queer lead.<sup>38</sup> The famous children's show, *Arthur*, opened its 22nd season with a gay wedding as the character of Mr. Ratburn comes out as gay.<sup>39</sup> While all these queer depictions received some pushback by conservative groups, it does not seem to halt progress as more and more children's media celebrate queer stories. Looking at Hades and HIM, characters like these, that came out of 1990s apocalyptic thinking, have become rare entities. The binary "good versus evil" stories, that are lazily applied to children's stories, not only underestimate children as consumers but greatly demonizes an entire group of people. Children's media remains a powerful tool used to teach and inform them of cultural issues of the time. Without diversifying the perspectives, these stories, told from a conservative Protestant Christian point of view, dominate children's films and TV series, while clinging to old, outdated representations of queer people.

## Notes

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