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**The Children's Horror Film:  
Beneficial fear and subversive pleasure in an  
(im)possible Hollywood subgenre**

Catherine Lester

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Declaration of Inclusion of Published Work

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university. Parts of Chapter One and Chapter Three of this thesis were published by the author as 'The Children's Horror Film: characterizing an "impossible" subgenre' in *The Velvet Light Trap* 78 (Fall 2016), pp. 22-37.

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the children's horror film in Hollywood cinema. Children are typically thought of as being innocent and vulnerable, and horror – usually considered a genre for adult viewers – is one area of the media from which children are often thought of as needing protection. However, evidence shows that children's viewership and enjoyment of horror films dates to least as early as the 1930s, while violent imagery has been used as a pedagogical tool in fairy tales, cautionary tales and other children's stories for centuries. The number of horror films made specifically *for* and *about* children in US cinema has been steadily increasing since the 1980s, with recent releases including *Coraline* (2009), *ParaNorman* (2012) and *Frankenweenie* (2012). Despite this, scholarship dedicated exclusively to this rich and intriguing area is scarce.

One intention of the research, explored predominantly in Chapter One, is to chart the development of this subgenre in Hollywood, explore how it differs aesthetically, formally, narratively and thematically from 'adult' horror, and how it mediates its content in order to be recognisably 'horrific' while remaining 'child-friendly'. Following the review of scholarly literature in Chapter Two, the thesis is then divided into three case study chapters which focus on how horror films which are both addressed to a child audience and about child characters utilise iconography and conventions of the horror genre to represent specific fears and desires associated with children and childhood.

Chapter Three examines texts which feature 'monstrous' children. These child characters' 'monstrosities' are presented in a way that can be read as pleasurable and potentially cathartic for a child audience. As such, these representations largely subvert the common depiction of children as demonic antagonists in adult horror films. The chapter is also framed by societal fears that children may become 'monstrous' threats should they be exposed to horror in order to argue that these films offer critiques upon the relationship between children and the horror genre. Chapter Four explores texts from the late-1980s to early-1990s in which children must protect themselves and their communities from evil vampires, witches, and other monsters. These predatory 'risky strangers' are read as reflecting contemporaneous concerns about child abuse which were particularly prevalent during this period in the US. As such, the chapter queries whether these texts address adults' fears *about* or *for* children more than actual children's fears. Chapter Five examines films set in the home, which is presented as an uncanny and threatening space in which to address childhood fears and anxieties concerning maturation, independence, identity formation and familial relationships. It is argued that by facing their fears, the child protagonists of these films undergo beneficial experiences and emerge better prepared to face life ahead.

This thesis argues that children's horror films, by providing safe and pleasurable spaces in which to experience fear, can be read as offering positive and beneficial experiences for child viewers. Far from being 'unsuitable' for children, the imagery and conventions of the horror genre are in fact highly suited to addressing the fears and experiences of childhood. Simultaneously, however, this thesis questions the problematic ideological aspects of children's horror films which may be 'bad' for children: that is, in showing children how to overcome their fears, what, or who, do these films imply children should be afraid of?

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## Introduction

### Thinking of the Children

‘Won’t somebody *please* think of the children?’

This familiar refrain is the catchphrase of *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) character Helen Lovejoy (Maggie Roswell). In several episodes the reverend’s wife histrionically interjects public debates with this plea. In standard *Simpsons* fashion, the debate at hand is usually ridiculous in nature and bears no direct relation to children, emphasising the absurdity of Lovejoy’s appeal for comic effect. From the first instance of this in the episode ‘Much Apu About Nothing’ (7.23, tx. 5/5/1996), *The Simpsons* intended to satirise the frequency with which ‘thinking of the children’ is used in cultural discourse, especially in debates relating to issues that have sparked a moral panic in society.

Two enduring victims of ‘thinking of the children’ are cinema and the horror genre, coinciding in the form of the horror film, due to their perceived harmful effects on young viewers. The concept is therefore pertinent to this study of the children’s horror film. Annette Kuhn details how the effects of the cinema on children, particularly its potential to morally corrupt them, have been the subject of public concern from the medium’s earliest years (2002: 197). Horror films only increased this concern, particularly in the early 1930s with the introduction of sound horror films such as *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Florey, 1932). According to Sarah J. Smith, concern in the US and UK surrounding children’s exposure to horror talkies stemmed from these films’ combinations of ‘sex, violence and the supernatural, which broke taboos, challenged Christian values and subverted the social order’ (2005: 57). Demonstrating the extent to which concern for children’s welfare and the horror genre are historically embroiled, this anxiety directly resulted in the creation of the label ‘horror’ in the UK film industry, which was defined as

'likely to frighten or horrify children'. Previously, such films were known as 'thrillers' or 'frightening films' (Kuhn, 2002: 199-200).

Worries about the 'harmful' effects of horrific media on children pre-date the invention of film, for example in relation to 'penny dreadfuls' in Britain in the late-nineteenth century. These cheap adventure stories, which sometimes contained violence, were blamed for several crimes committed by teenagers and children (Summerscale, 2016: 111-13). Similar anxieties have occurred throughout the twentieth century in relation to other media. In the 1940s and 1950s in the US, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham claimed that the 'corrupting influence' of horror comics would transform child readers into juvenile delinquents (1954: 4).<sup>1</sup> Later in the early-1980s in the UK, heated media debate was sparked by a group of horror video tapes known as 'video nasties'. Due to a loophole in film classification laws these were not regulated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), theoretically making them easier for children to access and resulting in concern that these films would have a negative effect on children who were exposed to them.<sup>2</sup> This debate resurfaced in 1993 in the wake of the murder of toddler James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys, who were suspected to have been inspired by the horror film *Child's Play 3* (Bender, 1991).<sup>3</sup> These anxieties continue to surface in differing national contexts in the twenty-first century, particularly in relation to children's exposure to horrific and violent imagery via newer media such as video games and the internet (Kirsh, 2012).

Despite these enduring concerns that 'horrific' media has a negative effect on children's behaviour, wellbeing and development, there is a lack of conclusive evidence to prove that this is the case. For example, Wertham is proven to have falsified or

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<sup>1</sup> See also Wertham (1948). For discussion of Wertham's findings and their effects on the US comics industry see Bradford W. Wright (2001).

<sup>2</sup> A number of academic works on the video nasty scandal are available, for example Julian Petley (1984), Martin Barker (1984) and Kate Egan (2007). The documentary film *Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship & Videotape* (West, 2010) also provides an informative overview.

<sup>3</sup> For further information and discussion see David Buckingham (1996: 19-56).

misrepresented much of the data that he used to form his argument (Tilley, 2012). More often than not, horrific media becomes a convenient scapegoat blamed at the expense of exploring other environmental or psychological factors that might cause violent behaviour in children. These anxieties also seem hypocritical in light of the fact that for centuries many forms of 'child-friendly' literature, including cautionary tales, rhymes, lullabies and even the Bible, have contained violent and frightening elements (Reynolds, 2005: 151). The difference between these and other horrific media is that the former are designed to do children some 'good'. Maria Tatar suggests that in this way children's stories that use fear as a didactic tool reveal more about their adult creators than their child readers: 'adults instrumentalize narrative violence in order to discipline and socialize children in the name of guiding and healing them', but actually intend to 'secure the child's willing submission' to adults (1998: 71-73). In a similar vein, William Paul suggests that attempts to protect children from horrific media do not reveal an interest in protecting children, but in protecting *adults* from what children might become when exposed to it (1994: 277).

These suggestions highlight the falsity behind 'thinking of the children'. Another flaw with the concept is that it very rarely involves consulting with actual children. When children's views on horror *are* pursued, we find that many children deliberately seek out and enjoy frightening media (Cantor and Reilly, 1982: 90; Buckingham, 1996: 112). There are also numerous examples of adult horror fans stating that they were first exposed to horror films as a child, either in supposed 'child-friendly' entertainment such as Disney animated films (Cherry, 1999: 196) or by watching adult horror films that are not addressed to nor suitable for children (Barker et al, 2016: 2, 59-77).

Although many children do find the experience of consuming horrific media frightening – which is, of course, the point of horror – many children find it a positive experience. This is evidenced by David Buckingham's study on children's emotional

responses to horror films and television programmes, in which he observes that the act of watching horror seemed to be regarded by his child respondents as a social bonding exercise (by way of performing bravado and maturity in front of one's peers) and a therapeutic experience (1996: 111). The study also reveals that children are far from passive viewers who are easily corrupted, and are in fact very capable of taking control over their viewing and enacting specific viewing strategies in order to cope with the negative feelings evoked by horror; for example, by turning off the television, covering their eyes or leaving the room if what they are watching is too scary, or by repeat viewings to familiarise themselves with what frightens them and/or work out how it is achieved in the filmmaking process, and thus 'conquer' their fear (ibid.: 113-14). The idea that consuming frightening fiction is therapeutic or beneficial for children chimes with Bruno Bettelheim's theory that fairy tales, which often contain violent imagery, provide a positive function for child readers as they 'depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence' (1976: 73). Although it is just as difficult to prove that horror is *good* for children as much as it is *bad* for them, these conflicting attitudes toward the effects of horror on children provide important contextual background for this thesis' focus on horror films addressed to children. The potential 'benefits' of horror for children are explored in further detail in Chapter Two.

In spite of the attention that has been given to children's relationship with horrific media and the extent to which it does or does not harm them, scant work has been done on the texts themselves – especially horror made specifically with a child audience in mind. Horror films with an appeal to children have existed for as long as cinema, as revealed by the work of Kuhn and Smith referenced above. This is also the case for child-friendly 'non-horror' films containing frightening elements, such as *Pinocchio* (Luske and Sharpsteen, 1940). The focus of this thesis, however, is horror films made specifically for children in Hollywood cinema. As detailed in the following chapter, these have existed since the 1980s. The lack of

academic interest in this area is therefore disappointing given the clear appetite of many children for frightening media, the long history of children's horror films, and their rich potential for critical and textual explorations.

Where children's texts feature in existing horror scholarship it is usually only in passing or discussed in brief detail. Take for example Roger Luckhurst's *Zombies: A Cultural History*, in which children's zombie texts get one mention in the conclusion (2015: 169). *The BFI Companion to Horror* contains a short entry on 'Young Adult' horror, which conflates children's and teen horror films despite their important differences, which are elaborated upon below (Scott, 1996). Helen Wheatley's article on British children's Gothic television series of the 1970s and 1980s is one of the few studies that attends to children's Gothic/horror audio-visual texts in detail, but she admits that the article arose from her realisation that children's texts were overlooked in her earlier 2006 monograph *Gothic Television* (2012: 383). This forgetting of children's horror also occurs in studies of children's cinema. Noel Brown's history of the Hollywood family film is a rare example that *does* mention horror films for child and/or family audiences but only once, in brief, in a list of subcategories of the family film (2012: 165). Then again, this absence of attention given to children's horror is hardly surprising given that, as Peter Krämer points out in relation to cinema, children's films as a generic category are usually completely absent from monographs or edited collections addressing genre. This is particularly egregious given that other genres defined by their target audience, such as the woman's film, are almost always included in such collections (2002: 185).

In some of the rare cases where children's horror is discussed in detail, it is derided and patronised for not being 'real' horror. This offence is committed by Kim Newman, who says that 'no one needs a safe horror picture' in reference to a group of 1980s horror films about and aimed at adolescents including *The Gate* (Takács, 1987) and *The Lost*



*Boys* (Schumacher, 1987) (Newman, 2011: 283). Newman believes that these 'kiddie' films are 'unable to get seriously scary' and 'reduce the genre to the level of *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?*' (ibid.: 283). This alludes to what I refer to throughout this thesis as the 'impossibility' of children's horror films, in that they must perform a careful balancing act: If too scary, they cease to be for children. If not scary enough, they cease to be horror. I return to this issue in Chapter One. Although Newman hits upon this 'impossibility' of children's horror, his view is deeply flawed. Apart from being highly subjective, it makes the mistakes of judging films aimed at young viewers according to adult tastes, and of comparing their levels of scariness to adult horror films and being surprised when they cannot compete. Newman also fails to acknowledge the small but clear demand for child-oriented horror texts and to consider the potential worth of such films to their intended audience. As a well-seasoned *adult* horror fan and critic, Newman might not have a personal need for 'safe' horror. But children, who are typically not well versed in the genre, have a lower tolerance for fear, and who are very often restricted from watching adult horror films, might very well have this need. By failing to give proper consideration to children's horror films, or children's media culture altogether, we collectively fail to 'think of the children'.

Buckingham's study, despite 'thinking of the children' by consulting with them about horror, also largely ignores horror texts created specifically for children but for a brief acknowledgement in his concluding thoughts of Halloween paraphernalia and children's adaptations of classic horror texts, like the cartoon *Count Duckula* (ITV, 1988-93) (1996: 136). This stands out among the many other works that only briefly mention children's horror as Buckingham gives consideration to the possible service that children's horror texts provide their viewers. In what almost seems a response to Newman's derision of 'safe' horror, Buckingham hypothesises that in allowing child viewers to 'balance "negative" feelings of fear and disgust with "positive" ones of relief', children's horror texts 'provide a relatively

safe arena in which the fundamental anxieties with which the genre deals can begin to be addressed' (ibid.: 135-36).

### Structure and Aims

This thesis takes up Buckingham's idea that horror addressed specifically to child viewers can provide them with both positive and negative feelings. It is not the intention of this thesis to prove that this is the case, but rather to perform a detailed textual examination of how the films themselves, through their formal, aesthetic, narrative and thematic elements, can be read as addressing an assumed audience of children in order to evoke both fear and pleasure. In so doing, I wish to repurpose and rephrase the much maligned and satirised plea that opens this thesis, and is so often associated with protecting children from 'horrific' media, as 'Won't somebody *please* think of the children's horror film?'

In order to bring attention to this neglected area of Film Studies, my 'thinking of the children's horror film' can be broken down into the following key aims:

1. To chart the development of children's horror in Hollywood history, from a small number of disparate films in early and classical Hollywood which were predominantly comedic, did not star children and were not specifically addressed to children, to a small but thriving subgenre of films that are both made *for* and *about* children, and which seek to evoke both fear and fun;
2. To identify the subgenre's defining characteristics – including formal, aesthetic, narrative and thematic elements – and examine how horror differs when it is addressed to an audience of children rather than adults. This demonstrates that children's horror films are able to retain many of the generic identifiers of the horror genre but also successfully mediate horrific elements that are typically

considered 'unsuitable' for children, such as gore and violence, in order to remain both scary and 'child-friendly';

3. To examine in detail the key thematic and narrative elements of horror films that are addressed to and about children. Specifically, I intend to explore how themes relating to childhood fears and desires are represented through iconography and conventions of the horror genre, and to what end, but to also question whether children's horror films truly address children's fears, or adults' fears of/for children.

The first of these aims is explored in Chapter One. While providing a detailed history of the children's horror film is not my core aim, it is important to outline a brief history of the subgenre and contextualise it within the industry given the lack of existing research on this topic.<sup>4</sup> The second aim is also explored in Chapter One in order to establish exactly what I mean when I say 'children's horror film', however the differences between how adult and children's horror films present similar themes, motifs, and formal and aesthetic strategies are also highlighted throughout the thesis. Following a review of scholarly literature in Chapter Two, the third of the above aims is the core area of interest of this thesis and is addressed in three case study chapters.

Chapter Three examines texts which feature 'monstrous' children. These are *Gremlins* (Dante, 1984), *ParaNorman* (Butler and Fell, 2012) and a trio of films about child-vampires: *The Little Vampire* (Edel, 2000), *Hotel Transylvania* (Tartakovsky, 2012) and *Hotel Transylvania 2* (Tartakovsky, 2015). The chapter explores how the monstrous child characters embrace their 'monstrosity' as an empowering tool, and how this is presented in a way the child audience should find pleasurable and potentially cathartic. The chapter also

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<sup>4</sup> Although, as detailed in Chapter Two, another PhD thesis taking a different methodological approach to the children's horror film has recently been completed, this does not provide a historical overview of the subgenre (Antunes, 2015).

builds upon the societal fears outlined above – that children may become ‘monstrous’ threats should they be exposed to horror – in order to argue that these films offer critiques upon the relationship between children and the horror genre. Also explored is the extent to which the monstrous child characters subvert the common depiction of children as evil, demonic beings in adult horror. Arising from this point is the question of whether children’s horror films actually prioritise fears and desires associated more with adult viewers than children. This is the core question of Chapter Four, which explores texts from the late-1980s to early-1990s in which children are under threat from unfamiliar and monstrous adults: *The Monster Squad* (Dekker, 1987), *The Witches* (Roeg, 1990) and *Hocus Pocus* (Ortega, 1993). These films’ predatory ‘risky strangers’ are read as reflecting societal concerns about child abduction and molestation which were particularly prevalent during this period in the US, thus addressing adults’ fears *about* children rather than children’s fears. Finally, Chapter Five examines *Monster House* (Kenan, 2006), *Coraline* (Selick, 2009) and *The Hole* (Dante, 2009) and the ways they present the home as an ‘uncanny’ space in which to address children’s worries about maturation, independence, identity formation and familial relationships. It is argued that facing and tackling these anxieties functions as a beneficial experience for the child characters, who emerge better prepared to face life ahead.

As this outline suggests, one of the core concerns of this thesis is the notion of the experience of horror being ‘beneficial’ for children. Again, as this is not an empirical study I do not intend to prove this. Rather, I argue that in presenting fictional children confronting and overcoming their fears and anxieties, children’s horror films address a child viewer in a comparable way to the address of the fairy tale to the child reader, as outlined by Bettelheim (1976), in that they can be read as performing a similar ‘beneficial’ function. As referenced in the title of this thesis, the second core concern is that of subversive pleasure. This refers to the very act of children viewing horror being subversive due to the widely held assumptions about horror being ‘bad’ or ‘unsuitable’ for children. However, it also refers to

specific pleasures that may be gleaned from individual texts, such as the pleasure that may be had in viewing monstrous children wreaking havoc and destabilising the status quo, as is explored in Chapter Three. Both of these beneficial and pleasurable aspects imply that children's horror films can be 'good' for children. However, I also intend to question the problematic ideological aspects of children's horror films which may be 'bad' for children: that is, in showing children how to overcome fear, what, or who, do these films imply children should be afraid *of*? As is explored in Chapters Four and Five, this question yields troubling results in relation to the way that some children's horror films portray women, female sexuality and normative gender roles. This raises the question of whether these films are truly addressing the fears of children, or the fears of adults – particularly a predominantly male fear of transgressive and monstrous female sexuality? Therefore, while my primary interest is in how children's horror films address an audience of children, I am also interested in the ways in which they address, represent and draw upon the fears and desires of adults. The child is still at the heart of this concern, given the possibility that an impression is left upon children – both within and outside of the texts – about how they should construct their own adulthoods as they age.

With this thesis it is my intention to show that, contrary to popular assumptions that the horror genre is 'not for children', the imagery and conventions of the horror genre are in fact highly suited to addressing the fears and experiences of childhood. The next section details the methodological approach that is employed to achieve this.

### Methodology

The primary methodological approach of this thesis is close textual analysis of the corpus texts. However, where useful, this is contextualised with analyses of the critical reception of the films, of their socio-historical context, of aspects of their production, marketing

materials, merchandise and other paratexts, and psychoanalytic concepts. Here this varied approach is defended, my use of the term 'children's horror film' clarified, and the method of corpus selection explained.

### **Textual analysis, or: valuing children's film**

V.F. Perkins opens *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* by detailing the struggle of the medium of film to be recognised as art akin to older, more established forms such as literature, music and painting (1972: 9-10). However, the eventual recognition of film as an art worthy of scholarly attention resulted in it being judged by the same broad criteria as all other art, rather than by the 'unique properties' that form the very essence of film (ibid.: 11-13). Perkins therefore states that we must judge film on its own terms *as film*, and that any useful theory of film should 'redirect attention to the movie as it is *seen*' (ibid.: 27; emphasis in original). This method of close textual analysis of film itself and its 'unique properties', i.e. mise-en-scène, editing, sound, music, etc., and how these work together in the process of meaning-making, is therefore employed as the primary method of this thesis. It is through close textual readings of the corpus texts that I can appropriately examine the key formal, narrative and thematic elements of children's horror films and how these synthesise to create moments of horror and pleasure and indicate an address to a child audience.

The notion of address is particularly important to the methodology of this thesis. This is not an empirical study that seeks to explore what real children think of children's horror or what they find frightening, but rather to examine through textual analysis what we can deduce children's horror films *think* their audience of children are, or should be, afraid of. What solutions do the texts provide for overcoming these fears? Do these texts really address the fears of children, or the fears adults have of/for children? What do the answers to these questions say about Western cultural attitudes toward childhood, children, and the entertainment that we consider appropriate for them? This thesis is therefore 'thinking of

the children' by way of thinking about the entertainment that is offered and addressed to them, and how it represents them.

This method adopts Umberto Eco's concept of the 'model reader' (1979 and 1994). The model reader is a hypothetical figure who is intended to respond to particular signals, or 'instructions', within a text which guide them to the appropriate responses as intended by the author (Eco, 1994: 15). The concept of the model reader can be adapted to the study of audio-visual media, as has been done by Wheatley, who uses the term 'model viewer' in her study of Gothic television (2006: 19). We can tell that the children's horror films under discussion in this thesis construct and address a model viewer who is a child, or at least an older viewer who is willing to temporarily adopt a childlike viewing perspective, through the characteristics of children's horror detailed in the following chapter; namely, the emphasis on child protagonists and issues affecting children, and the portrayal of adult characters as absent, ineffectual or evil which works to empower the child characters.

Returning to textual analysis as a method, while film is now widely recognised as art, children's media still struggles to be recognised as valuable outside of the commercial realm and as worthy of serious academic critique – that is, when children's media is recognised at all. Indeed, even Perkins' study lacks any detailed consideration of children's cinema. Krämer suggests that this neglect may arise from unfair, generalised prejudices that children's films are 'cheaply made and simply not very good' (2002: 186). Horror films are often subjected to similar generalisations, as well as assumptions that they are debased and depraved, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. The children's horror film therefore faces a double stigmatisation. In her article on children's Gothic television mentioned above, Wheatley recognises that her overlooking of children's programming in her earlier *Gothic Television* was particularly egregious given her realisation that 'these programmes were precisely where [her] interest in this genre had begun' (2012: 383). She goes on to quote

Tatar's assertion that '[t]he books we read when young get under our skin in countless ways [...]. They can affect us as much as real-life experiences' (2009: 22). This can also be applied to children's audio-visual media. Arguably, the texts that frighten us are even more likely to 'get under our skin' and remain with us throughout our adult lives. It is therefore all the more important that we take the children's horror film, and children's cinema generally, just as seriously, as valuable, and as capable of withstanding critical and aesthetic analysis as other forms of film. Or, to adopt Perkins' title, we must take children's film *as film*.

Richard Dyer notes that while textual analysis is one of the oldest and most commonly used methods in the practice and teaching of Film Studies, it is also one of the most contested, with other approaches, such as theory and studies of audiences, production or reception, challenging its validity (in Grant and Kooijman, 2016). However, Dyer argues that analysis of the film text is still central to all of these as well as a valid approach on its own, or we would be at the risk of doing 'film studies without films' (ibid.). It is therefore the case that although this thesis often employs other methods in addition to close textual analysis, as films do not exist in a vacuum, these readings are 'always underpinned by an engagement with the film text' (Peirse, 2013: 10).

### **Psychoanalysis and horror**

One of the additional methods employed by this thesis is reference to psychoanalytic concepts such as the uncanny (Freud, 1919). Psychoanalysis is one of the most widely applied methods in horror scholarship, yet also one of the most contentious. I therefore refer to Alison Peirse's defence of her mixed methodological approach in *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film* which employs psychoanalysis as well as combining analyses of formal elements, industrial discourses and critical reception:

I refuse to reject psychoanalysis as a useful mechanism for understanding *some* of the address of *some* of the films in this book. Some films are crying out to be psychoanalysed; [...]. The basis for this book therefore comes from the way I



look at individual films: what is interesting about them? What specific moments stand out? How are these moments made? (2013: 10; emphasis in original)

Brigid Cherry echoes this sentiment in saying that psychoanalysis can be the most effective when we ‘apply key concepts carefully and selectively in order to explore the nuances of particular horror films’ (2009: 102). As such, the uncanny strongly informs Chapter Five of this thesis precisely because the case studies ‘cry out’ to be read in this way (for example, due to the presence of uncanny motifs and the evocation of castration anxiety in *Coraline*). As the term ‘uncanny’ originates from the German *unheimlich*, which translates literally as ‘unhomely’, it would arguably be remiss to *not* refer to the concept in a chapter which is interested in the ways in which some films present the home as an unsettling, unfamiliar and distinctly ‘unhomely’ space.

Given the frequency with which scholarly literature turns to psychoanalysis in order to understand horror films, it can be argued that psychoanalysis is ‘unavoidable in discussing the genre’ (Carroll, 1990: 168). According to Steven Jay Schneider, this arises from the ‘enormous debt this genre owes to Gothic literature’ (2004: 6). William Patrick Day notes ‘striking parallels’ between Freudianism and the Gothic: ‘For Freud, dreams are the expression of wishes unacknowledged in waking life; the Gothic fantasy is the expression of the fears and desires created, but unacknowledged, by conventional culture’ (1985: 177). These parallels are echoed in Robin Wood’s approach to horror, which rests upon the idea that the monsters of the horror genre are representations of the repressed fears and desires – or ‘collective nightmares’ – of society (2003: 70). Given the frequency with which psychoanalytic approaches are encountered not just in horror scholarship, but also in approaches to children’s literature and culture, some further issues pertaining to psychoanalysis are discussed in Chapter Two. To be clear, this thesis does not engage with psychoanalytic theory as a primary method, but psychoanalytic concepts are often drawn upon as ‘useful mechanism[s]’ with which to illuminate the arguments made through the

primary method of close textual analysis, and to provide insight into the ‘question of how “horror” is created’ in the corpus texts (Peirse, 2013: 10).

### **‘Children’s films’ vs. ‘family films’**

Before identifying the characteristics of the children’s horror film, I must first clarify what I mean by ‘children’s film’ and why I employ this term rather than ‘family film’. Although ‘children’s film’ generally refers to films that are specifically addressed to children, Ian Wojcik-Andrews suggests that the term could also encompass ‘films about childhood, and films children see regardless of whether or not they are children’s films’ (2000: 19). However, by that reasoning the corpus of this thesis would have to consider practically all horror films. Hence, the corpus is narrowed to films that can be identified as children’s films due to aspects of their address, content, classification, marketing and merchandising. Yet children very often watch films in the company of, or are beholden to the purchasing choices of, an adult guardian. A more accurate term might therefore be ‘family film’. The terms ‘children’s film’ and ‘family film’ are frequently used interchangeably in the Hollywood context, and indeed, share many similarities. This is largely due to the fact that children are a core demographic of the target audience of each, meaning that both ‘children’s films’ and ‘family films’ must hold an appeal to, and be suitable for, child viewers. Yet, some critics argue that there are clear distinctions between them.

Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples identify family films as tending to feature adult stars in the lead roles as characters coping *with* children as secondary characters, references that children may not understand, and as privileging adult reactions and perspectives over those of children (1995: 95-96). In some cases a family film can be identified simply by its title, such as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (Johnston, 1989), as this clearly communicates that the narrative is told from the perspective of an adult who is dealing with a narrative problem involving children. Bazalgette and Staples suggest that were this a children’s film the title

would be *Sis, Dad Shrunk Us*, communicating their argument that children's films offer 'mainly or entirely a child's point-of-view', deal with 'the interests, fears, misapprehensions and concerns of children on their own terms' and 'foreground the problems of coping with adults, or of coping without them' (1995: 96). Finally, they claim that the family film is 'essentially American', and the children's film a European concept (ibid.: 94-95). This comes down to differing industrial contexts and financial stakes, as they argue that family films are preferred by Hollywood studios due to their broad demographic appeal which results in greater box office takings (ibid.: 96). A majority of the Hollywood children's horror films discussed in this thesis counteract this as they share the characteristics of children's cinema outlined by Bazalgette and Staples, i.e. the privileging of child characters and the problems facing them in the absence of reliable adults. However, as is discussed throughout this thesis and especially in Chapter Four, many of the corpus texts are also guilty of occasionally privileging an adult audience despite the fact that they appear to be addressed to, and about, children.

To come to a definitive conclusion about the distinction between children's and family films (if there is one) is not something that can be done in the remit of this thesis (if it can be done at all). However, Bazalgette and Staples' work shows that it is clearly possible to identify *some* films as addressing children more than adults. Therefore, although I acknowledge that to conflate children's and family films into one category is a valid scholarly approach in other contexts, it should be understood that for the purposes of this study and its aims, the term '*children's* horror film' is used to refer to horror films that are both addressed predominantly to children *and* which are about, and experienced primarily through the perspectives of, child protagonists. This therefore excludes horror films that are broadly suitable for children but which concern an adult protagonist or give equal prominence to the perspectives and concerns of adult and child characters (such as in a family unit), e.g. *The Addams Family* (Sonnenfeld, 1991), *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

(Selick, 1993), *The Haunted Mansion* (Minkoff, 2003), *Corpse Bride* (Burton, 2005) and *Wallace & Gromit in The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Box and Park, 2005). The labels 'family' and 'child-friendly' are used throughout to refer to films of this ilk. Here it should also be clarified that my use of the term 'adult horror' refers broadly to horror films that can be identified as addressing an audience of adults due to their depictions of the experiences, fears and concerns of adult characters and/or containing material that is typically considered 'unsuitable' for child viewers, such as extreme violence, gore, intensity, sex and swearing, and which result in a restrictive age classification.

My employment of the term 'children's (horror) film' follows in the vein of the definition of the woman's film. Like children's films, woman's films are a 'problematic generic entity' defined according to their intended audience despite being 'composed of [...] many diverse subcategories' (Hollinger, 2002: 78). The very idea of the woman's film can be considered offensive as it implies that all other films (i.e. most films) are 'men's films'. Thus, the existence of the woman's film 'both recognises the importance of women, and marginalises them' (Cook, 1983: 17). These same criticisms could be directed at children's cinema. Regardless, similarly to the children's film, the woman's film is a widely recognised generic category consisting of films which 'place at the centre of [their] universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman' (Bell and Williams, 2010: 3).

I also use the term 'children's horror film' as a statement of ownership on behalf of child viewers. Children are already vastly underserved by the horror genre, where most horror films are either not addressed to them or restricted due to film classification practices, and the few horror films that are addressed to children are often overlooked or derided for not being 'true' horror. Adults, meanwhile, have the freedom and privilege to watch all horror films regardless of the age of their target audience. By employing the term 'children's

(horror) film' I therefore use it as a powerful tool with which to state these films as being for children and belonging to them above all others.

Two further interrelated complications in making the distinction between children's, family and adult films are: what exactly is meant by 'child', and where do teen films and teen audiences factor into this? To say that the corpus texts feature child protagonists is not strictly accurate, as two of the protagonists of *The Hole* are teenagers. Yet, it is also not strictly a teen horror film, being classified as PG-13 and absent of some of the subgenre's typical characteristics such as an emphasis on romance and sexuality and strong levels of gore, violence and foul language. Importantly, unlike most teen films, there is also an actual child protagonist in *The Hole* with a narrative arc of his own, therefore providing a closer point of identification for younger viewers. However, the boundary between childhood and adolescence or adulthood can vary depending on whether this is considered as being marked by the onset of puberty, which varies from child to child, or by legal definitions, which vary between cultures or even, in the US context, from state to state. This thesis' use of 'child' and its derivatives therefore varies depending on the context. In reference to child *characters*, it is used as a broad term to refer to children and teenagers of all ages. However, in reference to child *viewers*, it is used to refer to children and pre-teens up to about the age of twelve. This difference in categorisation is made because of what is known in the US film industry as 'Peter Pan Syndrome'. This is a rubric developed by American International Pictures after a decade of market research into young film goers in the 1950s and 1960s (Doherty, 2002: 128). It states that younger children are willing to watch anything an older child will watch, but that older children and teenagers will not watch media addressed to younger children. This logic is also often extended to the types of characters that audiences will watch on screen, i.e. younger children will watch characters older than themselves, but older viewers will not as readily watch characters younger than themselves. This allows

children's horror films featuring teenaged characters to be categorised as such, even while a lower age cap is imposed on actual/assumed viewers.

### **Horror by any other name: selecting the corpus texts**

Children's horror is a meeting of two genres often considered incompatible, and can thus be considered 'impossible'. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter One by applying horror genre theory to children's horror films, they are entirely 'possible' and can be identified by their uses of imagery, narrative structures and other conventions of the horror genre, and by their mitigation of horrific, disgusting and other frightening aspects through several distancing strategies. Despite this, the perceived incompatibility of children and horror means that children's horror is not a widely recognised generic category by the academy, the film industry, film distributors, retailers and audiences. This complicates the method of corpus selection.

Children's horror films are variously referred to as genres adjacent to horror, such as fantasy, thriller, mystery and Gothic. While many children's horror films are necessarily hybridised with these genres to mitigate their horrific elements, it also means that actual children's horror films must be separated from children's films of other genres which contain monstrous imagery but are *not* horror, as well as family horror films and teen horror films, with which they are often grouped. This is the case at some film festivals, such as the 'Teen Mayhem' strand of science-fiction, horror and fantasy films for younger viewers at the UK's Mayhem Film Festival, with broadcast strategies such as the US television channel ABC's annual '13 Nights of Halloween' programming of child-friendly Halloween films each October, and with lists curated by film publications such as *Rolling Stone's* '12 Scariest Moments in Kids' Films' (Ehrlich, 2015). In the latter, films that are considered children's horror according to this thesis, like *The Witches*, are grouped with children's or family films

of other genres that merely contain frightening moments, such as *Watership Down* (Rosen, 1978), *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995) and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Newell, 2005).

In relation to the Gothic, I acknowledge that there are significant overlaps between this and horror to the extent that these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, for example in Charlie Higson's discussion of children's Gothic/horror texts (2013). For this reason, the arguments of this thesis regularly draw upon scholarly criticism on the Gothic where this proves relevant and useful. Due to the significant overlaps between horror and the Gothic I do not wish to draw a firm line between 'children's horror' and 'children's Gothic'. Nevertheless, my use of the label 'horror' over 'Gothic' needs clarification. One of the major links between horror and the Gothic is that they both intend to evoke fear and anxiety (Punter, 1980: 1; Gross, 1989: 1; Kavka, 2002: 210). Yet while horror is widely accepted as a genre, the Gothic is more often considered an aesthetic, style or mode that also applies to non-narrative forms of art, like architecture and fashion (Wheatley, 2006: 2). As such, 'Gothic' is a slippery term, at least more so than horror, and a definition is 'notoriously difficult to pin down' (Kavka, 2002: 210). For purpose of this thesis, which is in large part a generic study, the specificity of 'horror' makes it a more useful term than the much broader and loosely-defined 'Gothic'. Definitions of the horror genre, and by extension the children's horror film, are outlined in Chapter One.

Due to the difficulties posed by the generic overlaps between children's horror films and children's films of adjacent genres, potentially suitable films have to be taken on a case-by-case basis. A wide range of methods have been applied to locate as many children's horror films as possible, including extensively searching film retailers, online search engines and film databases, taking recommendations from friends, colleagues and secondary materials on the subject (which are discussed in Chapter Two), and simply through my own wide viewing habits. Of course, due to the size and scope of this project it would be impossible to give all

examples of the subgenre uniformly in-depth attention, but as explained by Tzvetan Todorov, studies of genre '[do] not require us to observe every instance of a phenomenon in order to describe it [...]. We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a general hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as needs be' (1970: 4).

Finally, this thesis focuses on children's horror films that are produced by the Hollywood film industry.<sup>5</sup> The children's horror film is not necessarily unique to the US, but US-produced children's horror films are by far the most numerous, as far as I can ascertain given the difficulties in identifying children's horror films that are outlined above.<sup>6</sup> That there appear to be more examples of children's horror films produced in the US than in other national contexts may be a result of the global film industry, particularly films aimed at child audiences, being largely dominated by US-produced content. However, given the Western context in which I am sourcing, viewing and analysing these films (as an English-speaking Brit situated in Britain, where a significant portion of theatrically-released films are from the US), it is also possible that barriers of language and geographical positioning prevent children's horror films from other national contexts coming up in my search. These films may not be available in Western markets or may not be listed in English-language film databases and catalogues (either at all, or with incomplete data that makes identifying their generic status or intended audience difficult). These are limitations which unfortunately cannot be satisfactorily overcome within the size and scope of this project. As for why I have chosen to exclude British examples despite my own background and location, this is because I have been able to locate very few examples of British children's horror films that are both

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'Hollywood' is used synonymously with the US film industry throughout this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> Some examples of children's horror films from other national contexts include the Canadian films *Frankenstein and Me* (Tinnell, 1996) and *Believe* (Tinnell, 2000), and a Mexican trilogy of animated films: *La Leyenda de la Nahuala/The Legend of Nahuala* (Arniaz, 2007), *La Leyenda de la Llorona/The Legend of La Llorona* (Rodriguez, 2011) and *La Leyenda de las Momias/The Legend of the Mummies* (Rodriguez, 2014).



addressed to and about children. One of these is *The Witches*, included in this study as it is a US co-production and because it changed the nationality of its protagonist from English, as it is in the source novel (Dahl, 1983) to American, thus indicating an address to American audiences. Another is *Paperhouse* (Rose, 1988), but although it features many of the generic characteristics of children's horror films (i.e. a focus on the fears and worries of a child protagonist), and is based on a children's novel (Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams* [1958]), the film has a BBFC rating of 15, making its status as *children's* horror within its national context ambiguous. Finally, there are three horror films that were produced by the Children's Film Foundation (CFF): *The Man from Nowhere* (Hill, 1975), *Haunters of the Deep* (Bogle, 1984) and *Out of the Darkness* (Krish, 1985). As other academic works have provided thorough accounts of the historical and cultural significance of the CFF (Staples, 1997; Shail, 2016), and because these films appear in such a short time-frame comparative with the US examples discussed in this thesis, I have opted not to include them in this study.

By focusing only on Hollywood children's horror films, this thesis aims to provide a detailed examination of how the horror genre can be used to address fears and desires associated with childhood, and how the subgenre has developed across time, in *one* specific national and industrial context in which I can confidently assert that children's horror films have been a consistent presence for several decades. These films display an engagement with the socio-historical contexts in which they are made and in which there have consistently been cultural anxieties concerning the effects of horror upon children, as well as other threats to children and childhood. My intention is that this can begin a dialogue in the academy on the subject of children's horror films. This may then be broadened out to consider children's horror films from other national and industrial contexts, as well as family horror films, children's films with frightening elements but which are of genres other than horror, children's horror in other audio-visual media (e.g. television), and empirical studies on children's responses to children's horror films.

## Chapter One

### From *Frankenstein* to *Frankenweenie*: the history and characteristics of children's horror in Hollywood cinema

Given the lack of scholarly research on the children's horror film, it is necessary and interesting to provide a brief history of this subgenre in Hollywood cinema. We know from the work of Kuhn and Smith, referenced in Introduction, that horror films with an appeal to children have existed from very early on, with notable examples including *Frankenstein* and Universal's other monster films released between the 1930s and 1950s. However, whether these should be considered 'children's horror films' is questionable. This is in part because there is no evidence to show that horror films of this era were conceived or marketed with children as a core part of the target audience, and children's very attendance at these early horror films was a source of cultural anxiety. There is also very little about the films' narratives, themes and characters that appear to be deliberately constructed to address children more than adults. As referenced above, Bazalgette and Staples convincingly argue that children's films can be identified as having child protagonists and narratives that pertain to children's 'interests, fears, misapprehensions and concerns' (1995: 96).

To take the Universal's *Frankenstein* as an example, it does not contain any child characters aside from Maria (Marilyn Harris), a little girl who befriends the Monster (Boris Karloff), and who only appears briefly before being accidentally drowned by him. Tellingly, this scene was widely censored to excise the girl's drowning, perhaps exhibiting a case of 'thinking of the children' both in the film and in the audience. However, the Monster himself is a very childlike being. This was perhaps part of the film's appeal to child audiences of the 1930s, as well as the source of the enduring popularity of the figure of the Monster in later

children's or child-friendly horror texts.<sup>1</sup> In *Frankenstein*, the Monster is essentially a new born navigating the world around him, learning the rights and wrongs of society and frequently getting them wrong. He might therefore be seen as a kindred spirit by child viewers who identify with his status as an unwanted or misunderstood child with a difficult relationship with their parent/creator. To think of the Monster as a child allows *Frankenstein* to be considered a children's film according to Máire Messenger-Davies' claim that children's stories tend to be about childlike adults or animals in addition to or instead of actual children (2010: 136-37). However, other elements of the film lead to the conclusion that it is not a children's horror film. These elements are namely the dominant narrative theme being the unethical, irresponsible and overly-ambitious use of science by the film's morally questionable human adult protagonist, Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive), and that the film ends with the death of the Monster and the celebration of this fact. These elements stand in contrast to the widely-held beliefs that children's stories should encourage good morals and end happily.

The ability to identify children's horror films in early Hollywood cinema is further complicated by the Motion Picture Production Code, which was enforced from the 1930s until 1968. This aimed to ensure that all films released in the US did not contain any objectionable content that might 'lower the moral standards of those who see it', inclusive of children (Leff and Simmons, 2001: 286). The Code had no age restrictions, unlike the current Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system which replaced the Code in 1968. As such, almost all films released in the US under the enforcement of the Code could be considered 'suitable for children', though not necessarily 'children's films'. How then do we identify those that can be classified as 'children's films'? Wood states that '[t]he

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Mad Monster Party* (Bass, 1967), *Groovie Goolies* (CBS, 1970-71), *The Monster Squad*, *Alvin and the Chipmunks Meet Frankenstein* (Castillo, 1999), *Frankenstein's Cat* (CBBC, 2008), *Igor* (Leondis, 2008), the *Hotel Transylvania* films, the short film *Frankenweenie* (Burton, 1984) and its 2012 feature-length adaptation which is discussed in detail at the end of this chapter.

category of children's films has of course always existed' (2003: 145). Wood does not elaborate, but several scholarly works offer histories of children's cinema from the silent era onwards (e.g. Street, 1982; Jackson, 1986; Wojcik-Andrews, 2000; Brown, 2012). These are generally in agreement that the earliest examples of children's films include adaptations of classic children's literature and fairy tales, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) and the silent shorts *Alice in Wonderland* (Hepworth and Stow, 1903) and *Pinocchio* (Antamoro, 1911). Child star vehicles, like the films of Shirley Temple (e.g. *Bright Eyes* [Butler, 1934]), are also widely considered to be children's films. These sub-categories share in common the prominence of child characters, a focus on the issues affecting them, and a happy ending. These historical overviews of children's cinema confirm Wood's belief that children's films have always existed. However, nowhere in these histories of the early years of children's cinema do horror films make an appearance.

### Fun Without Fear: Hollywood's early attempts at children's horror

To trace the development of the children's horror film in Hollywood cinema, we can look to the Disney studio. Although Walt Disney was adamant that the studio '[did] not make films primarily for children', but for 'the child in all of us, whether we be six or sixty' (in Behlmer, 1982: 60), it cannot be ignored that the studio's output very quickly became and remains primarily associated with children's entertainment. Disney also had very little competition in children's entertainment in the US until the 1980s. The studio therefore makes for the most effective case study with which to demonstrate the evolution of children's horror in Hollywood cinema.

In its early years Disney produced the short films *Hell's Bells* (Iwerks, 1929), *The Skeleton Dance* (Disney, 1929) and *The Haunted House* (Disney, 1929). These cartoons combine Gothic and horrific imagery with slapstick comedy, upbeat music and dancing to

produce fun house-style spectacles. *The Skeleton Dance*, for example, takes place at night in a graveyard populated with spiders, hooting owls and howling dogs. Slowly, a group of human skeletons rise from their graves and begin to perform a synchronised dance. It becomes increasingly elaborate as the skeletons dismantle their bodies and use their own bones and the bones of each other as instruments (Figure 1.1). These films therefore revel in the pleasure of the absurd and the grotesque, particularly in relation to the human body. These are two elements with a clear childish appeal, as is elaborated upon later in this chapter in relation to children's horror films in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century Hollywood.

Disney's first animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937), is an important landmark in the history of children's horror due to two scenes widely known for frightening children: Snow White's (Adriana Caselotti) perilous journey through the woods, and the transformation of the wicked queen (Lucille La Verne), Snow White's stepmother, into an old woman. Disney received hundreds of letters of complaint from parents of frightened children (Schickel, 1968: 220), and in the UK the film was deemed so scary as to necessitate receiving an A certificate from the BBFC, meaning that children had to be accompanied by an adult (Smith, 2005: 1). Disney's later *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (Geronimi and Kinney, 1949) serves as an interesting comparison to *Snow White* as it also



Figure 1.1: One skeleton uses the thigh bones of a second skeleton to play the latter's spine like a xylophone in Disney's *The Skeleton Dance*.



Figure 1.2: Ichabod and his horse have a highly 'cartoonish' style, which functions as a distancing strategy.

contains a sequence in which a childlike adult travels through some spooky woods alone, but the film takes measures to make this far less frightening, and more 'child-friendly', than *Snow White*. Like the short films mentioned above, *Sleepy Hollow's* emphasis is on eliciting amusement rather than fear. Important to this is that its protagonist, Ichabod Crane (Bing Crosby), is portrayed as a cowardly buffoon who cannot help but get himself into slapstick situations. Unlike Snow White, who is animated with a realistic a sense of movement and expression, Ichabod is absolutely 'cartoonish': almost inhumanly lanky but with an oversized nose, ears and hands, and his head spins 360 degrees and his skin turns green when he is extremely frightened (Figure 1.2). This lack of realism functions as a distancing strategy that allows viewers to laugh *at* Ichabod's fear without sharing it.

In spite of their different approaches to horror, both *Snow White* and *Sleepy Hollow* share another key strategy that works to alleviate frightening elements and that is also crucial to late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century children's horror films. Kimberley Reynolds observes that children's horror fiction is 'notable for the sense of security it provides', as 'what was thought to be inexplicable is explained, and what seemed dangerous and menacing is made safe' (2006). This is demonstrated in the protagonists' imaginations causing them to see and hear frightening things that are actually harmless: Ichabod's realisation that what he thought were pounding footsteps pursuing him are just reeds banging against a log, and Snow White's realisation that what she thought were the menacingly glowing eyes of trees in the wood are actually those of friendly woodland creatures. These distancing strategies of swift reassurance, stylised animation and slapstick comedy are elaborated upon below in relation to contemporary children's horror films. In addition to these Disney films, other notable child-friendly horror films of Code-era Hollywood that use these distancing strategies include *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* (Rafkin, 1966) and the stop-motion animated *Mad Monster Party* (Bass, 1967). The former is a comedy similar in concept to *Sleepy Hollow*, but with the woods replaced with a haunted

mansion that was once the site of a gruesome murder and in which a cowardly, superstitious journalist (Don Knotts) must spend the night alone. However, what he thinks are ghostly happenings are revealed to be elaborate tricks played on him by the caretaker (Liam Redmond), in an uncanny anticipation of the structure of the popular horror-comedy cartoon series *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!* (CBS, 1969-70). *Mad Monster Party* qualifies as an example of the child-friendly, comedic adaptations of classic horror texts mentioned by Buckingham (1996: 136) as it contains a wide variety of monstrous characters, such as Frankenstein's Monster, Dracula and the Invisible Man, who are divorced from their horrific context and placed in a humorous situation, thus making these characters 'suitable for children'.

Although these pre-Code and Code-era films are important to the development of children's horror in US cinema, with the exception of *Snow White* there is little about them that is likely to actually scare. As such, they only fulfil the 'pleasure' aspect of this thesis' core interest in the pleasurable and frightening elements of children's horror films. They also do not feature children as central characters, and thus do not address the fears and concerns of children. It is not until after the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968 that horror films began to be produced that directly addressed children as the primary audience, contained real children as capable protagonists facing and conquering dangerous threats, and actually attempted to be 'horrific'.

### Children's Horror in New Hollywood and Beyond

The abolition of the Code and its replacement with the MPAA ratings system in 1968 signalled a major turning point in Hollywood. This change is particularly pertinent to the histories of both the children's film and the horror film, and by extension the children's horror film. The age-based ratings system of the MPAA allowed some films to be restricted

to adult audiences only, and therefore contain content thought to be unsuitable for children and previously impermissible under the Code, such as increased levels of violence, sexuality, bad language, and acts of moral depravity.<sup>2</sup> The horror genre was a particular beneficiary of this change. As noted by Wood, the 1970s are commonly considered the ‘Golden Age’ of the American horror film, despite (or alternatively because of) the fact that the horror films produced in this climate were ‘more gruesome, more violent, more disgusting [...] more disturbed and more disturbing’ than ever before (2003: 63). In other words, horror became more ‘adult’ in nature, hence Kevin Heffernan points to the introduction of the ratings system as being a significant factor in the development of ‘adult horror’ in US cinema (2004: 7, 181-201). Heffernan highlights *Rosemary’s Baby* (Polanski, 1968) as being exemplar of this new form of adult-oriented horror film, characterised by contemporary settings, downbeat endings and explicit violence (2004: 201). Not only were children restricted from seeing films of this type due to their age classifications, but the latter two of these three key characteristics are typically considered to be inappropriate for children’s entertainment.

By simple virtue of opposition, if the MPAA ratings system resulted in the emergence of ‘adult’ horror films containing mature themes and content that children were, theoretically, restricted from seeing, this also opened a space for the production of horror films directed predominantly at children, with unrestrictive MPAA ratings of G and PG. However, the segmentation of audiences by age did not result in a boom in production of children’s films, horror or otherwise. Rather, as the market became increasingly oriented towards teens and young adults, there was a lack of child-friendly content offered by Hollywood, and a lack of satisfaction with the little that was offered (Krämer, 2006: 268). The

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<sup>2</sup> The MPAA ratings started out as G (General audiences), M (Mature audiences – parental discretion advised), R (Restricted to those over seventeen years of age only, unless accompanied by an adult) and X (restricted only to those over seventeen years of age). M later changed to PG (Parental Guidance) and X changed to NC-17, as the ‘X’ label had gained connotations with pornography. PG-13 was introduced in 1984, which is situated between PG and R.



performance of the Disney studio during this period, which was marked by creative and economic struggles, is emblematic of this.

As described above, the Disney studio became synonymous with children's entertainment despite its attempts to cater audiences of all ages. The extent to which Disney was inextricably associated with 'safe' children's entertainment is displayed by a survey on women's opinions of the film industry carried out by *McCall's* magazine in 1967, one year after the death of Walt Disney and one year before the end of the Code. At this point, the boundaries of the Code were being increasingly challenged by violent films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967). In the context of this climate, respondents of the *McCall's* survey are reported as worrying what they can take their children to see 'now that Walt Disney is dead' (Hershey, 1967: 28). Presumably, these worries would only have increased given the difficulties that faced Disney in the 1970s and 1980s. Following Walt Disney's death, the studio underwent major changes in management, survived aggressive takeover attempts, and struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing industry (Gomery, 1994: 78-79). For example, it attempted to respond to the unprecedented success of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) with the expensive and tonally dark science-fiction films *The Black Hole* (Nelson, 1979) and *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982), which were financial and critical disappointments. Yet the struggles of Disney at this time also resulted in the studio's first real forays into children's horror films that are both about children and address child-like fears and concerns with a frightening tone: *The Watcher in the Woods* (Hough, 1980) and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (Clayton, 1983).

Like much of Disney's output at the time, these films were financial disappointments. This was perhaps due to the uneasy combination of their dark themes and sombre tones with the popular conceptions of the Disney brand as safe and saccharine. In fact, with these films Disney seemed intent on distancing itself from its 'harmless' fairy tale roots and

showing that it was still relevant in the ‘edgier’ New Hollywood climate. This was the most overt in Disney’s positioning of *Watcher*, which they considered ‘our *Exorcist*’ (Tom Leetch in Stannard, 2011); the bizarre juxtaposition of the Disney brand with one of the scariest and most controversial horror films of all time is self-evident. Trailers warned that the film ‘is *not* a fairy tale’ and ‘not for small children!’, likely doing little to alleviate the concerns of parents that Hollywood was not appropriately catering to children (‘Trailer #1’, 2002). *Watcher* and *Something Wicked* are also markedly different from Disney’s relatively harmless earlier forays into horror, such as *Sleepy Hollow*, in several ways. While *Sleepy Hollow*’s hero is a buffoonish adult, the later films contain real children and address children’s worries, fears and desires. In *Something Wicked*, for example, the deepest desire of one of the protagonists, Jim (Shawn Carson), is to grow up. This is implied to stem from the absence of his father, a gap that Jim perhaps wishes to fill. This makes Jim vulnerable to the temptations of the sinister Mr Dark (Jonathan Pryce) who runs a supernatural carnival and offers Jim the ability to become an adult; however, Mr Dark has an agenda to steal Jim’s soul. Though Jim is tempted, he is deterred from aging himself by his best friend Will (Vidal Peterson). The film therefore deals with themes likely to resonate with children in the audience – maturity, child-parent relationships, and the power of friendship – through frightening means.

*Something Wicked* and *Watcher* are also likely to be much more frightening than the earlier *Sleepy Hollow* as they do not attempt to alleviate their frightening elements through the use of comedy or animation. Further, both films were helmed by experienced horror directors: Jack Clayton, director of *Something Wicked*, previously directed *The Innocents* (1961) while John Hough claims to have been hired to direct *Watcher* due to his work on *The Legend of Hell House* (1973) (‘Commentary with Director John Hough’, 2002). This horror heritage shows in each film, particularly in *Watcher* which borrows many effective formal strategies from adult horror films. This is most clearly demonstrated in a scene in which, following in the vein of *Snow White* and *Sleepy Hollow*, a vulnerable protagonist walks

through some woods alone. An unsteady, mobile camera shot which implies the voyeuristic gaze of a stalker follows teenager Jan (Lynn-Holly Johnson) through the woods. This strategy is strongly associated with slasher films of the period such as *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) and is effective at building tension from a character being unknowingly watched.

These Disney films' adoption of strategies from adult horror films, their foci on sympathetic, identifiable child characters under threat, and the lack of any significant relief from fear are likely major factors in their failure to gain traction at the box office. Too scary for children who were ill-catered by Hollywood at the time, and not scary enough for teens who were enjoying the violent thrills of 'adult' horror films that were thriving in New Hollywood, the films fell into a gap of irrelevancy, demonstrating the 'impossibility' of the children's horror film. Although *Watcher* and *Something Wicked* were unsuccessful attempts at children's horror, they can be considered as ahead of their time in anticipating the growing taste for children's films of darker moods and themes that would occur over the next three decades.

While Disney's attempts at horror in the early 1980s were unsuccessful, it was not long before two hugely profitable and critically acclaimed non-Disney films with strong appeal to child audiences helped to popularise the concept of horror for child audiences: *Ghostbusters* (Reitman, 1984) and *Gremlins* (Dante, 1984). Their successes can be attributed in part to their horror-comedy hybridity and their association with well-known names that gave them mass appeal to viewers of all ages. *Ghostbusters* starred *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-) alumni Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, and Steven Spielberg executive produced *Gremlins*. With its predominantly comedic tone and goofy but affable adult protagonists, *Ghostbusters* follows in the footsteps of the Code-era comedy-horror films with childish appeal discussed above. *Gremlins*, however, has a significant role in the emergence of children's horror due to the fact that it was considered frightening enough to warrant the

creation of a new film rating, PG-13. Situated between the PG and R ratings, PG-13 denotes that a film contains content that may not be suitable for young children but is also not objectionable enough to restrict children altogether. As Filipa Antunes (2014) argues, the implementation of the PG-13 was a watershed moment for children and horror in the US, as it opened further space for horror films to be created which were not too intense or violent to be given a restrictive rating of R or above, but were frightening enough that extra warning would be needed that the films might distress young children.

After 1984 a number of horror films addressed to children were released with PG or PG-13 ratings, such as *The Gate*, *The Monster Squad*, *Little Monsters* (Greenberg, 1989) and *The Willies* (Peck, 1990). Like Disney's earlier attempts at horror with *Watcher* and *Something Wicked*, these films feature child or adolescent protagonists having to defend themselves, their friends, families, and in some cases the world from dangerous supernatural forces. They also revolve around themes of friendship and family rather than those of sexuality typically found in teen horror films of the period like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) (Antunes, 2014: 26). Finally, these films feature adult authority figures, such as parents and lawmakers, who are evil, ineffectual, or absent altogether. This leaves – and empowers – the child protagonists to take matters into their own hands. In *The Monster Squad*, for example, the army arrive at the end of the film only to find that the titular Monster Squad, a group of children who are horror fans, have already successfully dispatched the threat. These factors of child protagonists, child-centric themes and an absence of reliable adult figures indicate a direct address to child and pre-teen audiences rarely seen in horror films made during Code-era Hollywood or before the implementation of the PG-13 rating, and they continue to characterise most child-oriented horror films made since. While some continue in the vein of Code-era comedies that appropriate monstrous imagery but are light on scares and told from the perspectives of adults, like *Hotel Transylvania*, there are many others, such as *Coraline*, *Monster House* and a number of other texts discussed throughout

this thesis, that focus on capable child protagonists and explore fears pertinent to childhood and adolescence through the generic conventions of horror. In so doing, these films can be read as addressing a child audience with the intent to elicit feelings of both fear and pleasure in equal measure.

### Identifying the 'Impossible'

This brief history of children's horror films has outlined some of the subgenre's key characteristics and strategies used to alleviate frightening aspects and make the films 'suitable for children'. The most significant of these strategies are humour, animation, a lack of realism, and swift reassurance after frightening moments. However, these strategies result in the 'impossibility' of children's horror. If the principal intention of the horror film is to horrify, but children's horror films must largely shy away from doing this in order to remain 'suitable for children', how can children's horror films be classified as 'horror' at all? To answer this, I turn to critical works that attempt to define the horror genre as it pertains to adults and consider how these arguments apply to children's horror films. I also examine in closer detail how contemporary children's horror films carefully combine alleviating methods with imagery, aesthetics and formal strategies associated with the horror genre and which attempt to evoke feelings of fear and suspense. The alleviating strategies named above are also supported and contextualised with industrial research.

A difficulty in discussing horror and attempting to define it is that fear, as with other emotional responses that form the basis of some film genres (e.g. amusement for comedy, sadness for melodrama), is subjective, particularly when it comes to children. Empirical evidence attests to the difficulty in anticipating what children will and will not find frightening. *Moomin* (TV Tokyo, 1990-91), the seemingly innocuous animated children's fantasy series about a family of cute 'trolls' who resemble anthropomorphic hippopotami, is

cited by children in two different studies as being frightening (Buckingham, 1996: 104; Lemish and Alon-Tirosh, 2014: 147). The subjectivity of fear also applies to adults. A twenty-first century audience might not be frightened by an early classic of the horror genre, like *Dracula* (Browning, 1931), and may be divided as to the 'scariness' of more recent offerings, from violent 'torture porn' films like *Saw* (Wan, 2004) to the psychologically unsettling *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014). Yet we are comfortable with broadly classifying these three disparate films as 'horror' given their adherence to certain codes and conventions of the genre, i.e. the use of recognisable motifs, iconography, themes and narrative patterns. By the same method, we would exclude *Moomin* for its lack of these identifiers. Richard J. Russell identifies this approach as 'objectivist' in contrast to the 'subjectivist' approach that focuses on the genre's emotional effects (1998: 234). For Russell, neither approach is satisfactory in isolation, with objectivism being limiting in not accounting for variation and hybridity in the genre. This aligns with Steve Neale's work on genre theory, in which he argues that only focusing on repetitive similarities between films ignores the very things that give genres longevity: variation and difference (2000: 173). Conversely, Russell sees the subjective approach as being far too broad and vague, in that how 'scary' something is can vary wildly from person to person (1998: 235). With that said, it can usually be recognised when a film is *attempting* to scare its audience with 'objective' identifiers, like the use of violence and/or gore, the creation of suspense and 'jump scares' through editing, lighting, sound and music, and a variety of other tactics; yet there will always be exceptions to every rule, carving out new space for genres to develop in what Neale refers to as 'processes' (2000: 165). These processes may 'be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, repetition, and change' (ibid.). As has already been noted above in relation to *The Watcher in the Woods*, children's horror displays generic repetition by employing similar techniques and narrative elements as horror films for adults. Crucially, children's horror also necessitates variation and difference from adult horror in order to be 'suitable for children'.

Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* is one of the seminal scholarly works that attempts to define the horror genre. Due to its emphasis on narrative structure and emotional responses it can be considered as operating between the objective and subjective camps, meaning that it serves as a useful basis for approaching children's horror in a generic context. Carroll works from the premise that horror is 'marked by the presence of monsters', but realises that this would include fairy tales, myths, and other stories of a fantastic nature 'that we are not inclined to identify as horror' (1990: 15-16). Indeed, this is a problem with children's horror given that the subgenre must often include fantasy elements in order to mitigate horror. Carroll resolves this by arguing that it depends upon the context in which the monster appears and how characters respond to them. In fairy tales, monsters are presented as 'ordinary creature[s] in an extraordinary world' (ibid.: 16). In horror, monsters are, according to Carroll's definition, 'extraordinary character[s] in our ordinary world' (ibid.). This is useful for differentiating children's fantasy films with frightening elements, like *The Wizard of Oz*, from children's horror films, which typically involve a real-world contemporary setting being invaded by a supernatural, monstrous presence that does not 'exist according to reigning scientific notions' (ibid.: 35). This corresponds with Wood's assertion that in horror, 'normality is invaded by the monster' (2003: 71). In addition, fantasy is typically considered to be escapist, and more specifically as presenting a 'dream' to escape into (sometimes literally, as is the case with *The Wizard of Oz*) (Fowkes, 2010: 7). Horror instead presents a 'nightmare' to be escaped *from*.

Carroll goes on to argue that horror's monsters are characterised by the emotional responses they are intended to evoke in the audience, which are fear and disgust (1990: 19). They are disgusting because they are impure: the result of the 'fusion' or transgression of categorical distinctions such as living/dead (e.g. zombies) or human/inhuman (e.g. werewolves) (ibid.: 43). We can see such monsters in children's horror, whether zombies and ghosts in *ParaNorman* or the titular house-woman hybrid of *Monster House*. Carroll's

limitation of horror monsters to those of supernatural origins is problematic as a definition of adult horror as it excludes ‘realistic’ monsters such as serial killers in the slasher film, which is widely considered a valid horror subgenre. Yet it is typically the gore, violence, and immorality displayed in some adult horror, particularly horror that is ‘realistic’ in nature, that is typically thought to be particularly detrimental to children. Carroll’s conception of horror as featuring only supernatural monsters is therefore suitable as a definition of children’s horror, as long as the actions of the supernatural monsters do not result in extreme violence, gore, or other qualities often deemed ‘objectionable’ in children’s content. With that being said, it is important to clarify that many of the issues and themes presented in children’s horror films *are* realistic, as explained above in the example of Jim’s desire to grow up in *Something Wicked*. Representing realistic fears and anxieties ensures that children’s horror films are able to bear relevance to their assumed audience while using a supernatural filter to prevent them from becoming *too* frightening; or, they ‘depict in *imaginary* and *symbolic* form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence’ (Bettelheim, 1976: 73; my emphasis).

That children’s horror films must refrain from depicting ‘realistic’ horror and violence aligns with the views of the MPAA, whose guidelines state that G-rated films should contain only ‘minimal violence’, PG-rated films ‘some violence’ that is not intense, and PG-13-rated films may contain violence that is not ‘realistic and extreme or persistent’ (MPAA and NATO, 2010: 7). Although this is a study of US children’s horror films it is also useful to refer to the guidelines of the British equivalent, the BBFC, which has a very similar set of film ratings and provides more detail on the restrictions of each category than the MPAA.<sup>3</sup> The BBFC’s

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<sup>3</sup> The equivalent BBFC ratings are U in place of the MPAA’s G, PG remaining the same, and 12A in the place of PG-13. While a child of any age may see a PG-13-rated film unaccompanied, the 12A indicates that a child under the age of twelve may see a film only if accompanied by an adult. It is not my intention to imply that the methods and reasoning behind the BBFC’s classifications of children’s horror films align exactly with those of the MPAA, however given the lack of insight that it is possible to get from the MPAA, the BBFC’s guidelines are a useful substitute. The relative lack of transparency behind the MPAA’s decisions is a highly controversial topic that has been widely



guidelines state that in a PG-rated film, violence is 'generally more acceptable in a historical, comedic or fantasy setting, because of the distancing that this provides' (BBFC, 2015a). Animation and lack of realism are also cited as mitigating factors (BBFC, 2015b). We can see these strategies in the Code-era films discussed above. *Sleepy Hollow*, for example, is comedic in tone, animated, and takes place in a historical setting, despite it hailing from the US and from a time before a film rating system was implemented there. The 2012 film *ParaNorman* (rated PG by both the MPAA and BBFC) serves as more recent example of these strategies playing out. One of the film's arguably most distressing scenes concerns the witch trial and sentencing to death of a little girl. It lacks the distancing elements named by the BBFC of comedy and fantasy, but it is animated and set in a historical context, the eighteenth century. At other points during *ParaNorman*, comedy is used in combination with moments of fear and disgust to mitigate the horror, which adheres with the BBFC's stipulation that frightening moments 'will be balanced by reassuring elements, such as comic interludes or music' (ibid.). Again, these strategies can be seen in early children's horror films, such as the Disney shorts discussed above. In *ParaNorman*, meanwhile, the zombies are clearly disgusting, with their pallid, sagging skin and detachable body parts, but there is an emphasis on their potential for amusement. During a sequence in which the zombies burst from their graves, for example, one emerges feet-first, and another backside-first. Inserting such instances of unexpected levity theoretically helps to prevent frightening moments from becoming too prolonged or intense and, as Buckingham posits, allows the presumed child audience to balance negative feelings of fear and disgust with positive ones of amusement and relief (1996: 135).

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criticised in the press (e.g. Buckwalter, 2013) and by many filmmakers. The criticisms of some of these filmmakers, as well as further details of the issue, can be seen in the documentary film *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006).

*ParaNorman*, while a good example of a children's horror film that fits the above criteria, also contains a caveat to the claim that children's horror should refrain from realism. In what might be the film's most objectively 'disgusting' moment, the protagonist becomes trapped beneath a corpse while trying to wrestle a book out of its rigamortis-frozen hands. When the corpse's tongue flops out of its mouth onto the boy's face, it transcends disgustingness to approach the abject in the sense theorised by Julia Kristeva: when a living person comes into contact with physical matter of death and is confronted with the knowledge that one day their own bodies will also decay (1982: 3). This is a rare moment of 'realistic' horror in a children's horror film in the sense that it is entirely possible (even if unlikely) for an ordinary child to come into contact with a corpse. However, once again the strategies of animation and comedy function to lessen the horror that it might evoke. *ParaNorman* is stop-motion animated with a particularly stylised aesthetic. The clear lack of realism may therefore function as a distancing strategy. Indeed, the director of *Coraline* – another stop-motion film produced by Laika, who also produced *ParaNorman* – states on the film's DVD commentary that he thought *Coraline* might be too scary for children if filmed in live-action ('Feature Commentary...', 2009). In the Conclusion of this thesis I question whether stop-motion truly does function to lessen horror. Regardless, the fact that some filmmakers of children's horror and film classification boards believe animation to function in this way is highly revealing of the way that such films address child viewers and are defined by the industry as being suitable for them. The scene with the corpse in *ParaNorman* may therefore elicit disgust from its child audience, but this will likely be lessened by the knowledge that it concerns fictional characters in a fictional setting. Further, any disgust felt by the audience will arguably not match that felt by the protagonist in this imaginary scenario, which aligns with Carroll's assertion that the emotions of horror audiences should be parallel to, 'but not exactly duplicate', those of the positive on-screen characters (1990: 18).

Following from Carroll's argument that the audience's emotions should be similar but not identical to those of the characters, *ParaNorman* also addresses the child audience with a comedic tone. This implies that one should feel amusement and, by extension, possibly pleasure, even though Norman clearly feels neither. The scene can clearly be read as a moment of 'gross-out' comedy as much as of 'gross-out' horror; two forms that Paul argues throughout *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (1994) are closely linked by their obsession with the human body's potential for disgust. To suggest that pleasure can be derived from disgust is contra to Carroll's attempt to account for the 'paradox' of why audiences deliberately watch something that scares or disgusts them. Disgust is merely the 'price to pay' for what Carroll sees as the true pleasure of horror: the satisfaction of the audience's curiosity through experiencing the way a narrative plays out and how it answers the question of if and how the monster will be destroyed (1990: 181-82). However, as we have seen with the skeletons dismantling their bodies in *The Skeleton Dance*, it is possible that pleasure can be derived from horror monsters not *in spite of* them being repulsive, but *because* they are repulsive – especially for child audiences. It might even be that the children's horror film is where disgust is best placed, for despite some concerns that horror is not suitable for children, 'adult horror' is often paradoxically accused of immaturity and is associated with adolescents (Evans, 1973; Twitchell, 1985; Williams, 1991). Although these claims are sometimes made in order to devalue the genre, it is often the case that pointing out the 'childishness' of the genre is done in an act of praise. Victoria de Rijke, for example, writes that horror is 'a childish genre, in the best sense' (2004: 516) and Stephen King refers to the 'primitive, childish level' of horror as an art-form: 'the good gross-out wallop finds its art in childish acts of anarchy' (1981: 218-19). The relationship between childishness and adult horror films is also implied in critical writing that refers to the act of watching horror as a game. Vera Dika's *Games of Terror* (1990) states this in its title, and Paul refers to the fun and playfulness of horror, likening watching horror to going to amusement

park 'where we make a game out of our own feelings' (1994: 421-22). If horror's pleasures can so often stem from the childishness it draws out in its adult viewers, then children's horror is not an 'impossible' subgenre at all, but an entirely possible and logical one.

Although 'gross-out' humour and horror might be key attractions and elements of horror for children, some children's horror films operate principally on a subtler form of horror where what is most frightening or disgusting is what is *not* shown; a tactic that is useful in obtaining an unrestrictive, and therefore 'child-friendly' film rating. This strategy can be seen at work in the sequence in *The Watcher in the Woods* discussed above that mimics the extended voyeuristic camera shots of slasher films. This allows the film to build an atmosphere of unease and suspense without showing anything that might be considered objectionable in a children's film. A number of more recent children's horror films follow suit: *Coraline*, *The Hole* and *Monster House*. The specifics of how these films utilise slasher tendencies are detailed in Chapter Five. In addition to its use of slasher techniques, *Coraline* is interesting for the way it suggests violence without showing it. The film's protagonist is in danger of having buttons sewn onto her eyeballs. The film makes passing reference to this violent procedure, but it is never shown or described in detail. Rather, the horror and disgust of the procedure are conveyed almost entirely through the protagonist's reaction to the idea of it, and she survives the film with both eyes intact.

Another way to identify a children's horror film is through its adherence to a typical horror narrative structure. This further enables us to differentiate between children's horror films and children's films of other genres, such as fantasy, that contain frightening elements. As referenced above, Carroll identifies the horror genre as being 'marked by the presence of monsters'; it is the presence of these monsters and what happens to them that many others refer to in their definitions of horror and the genre's typical narrative patterns. Wood, for instance, refers to the monster's importance to the horror narrative in his statement that

'normality is invaded by the monster' (2003: 71). Andrew Tudor goes further with his basic structure, based on a survey of over 900 horror films, that attempts to be specific to horror but is vague enough to allow for Neale's emphasis on the need for generic variation: 'a monstrous threat is introduced into a stable situation; the monster rampages in the face of attempts to combat it; the monster is (perhaps) destroyed and order (perhaps) restored' (1989: 81). Importantly, 'this can be realized in a variety of ways' (ibid.). This balance of specificity and variety is also central to Carroll's work on horror narratives. He identifies the key horror plot as the 'complex discovery plot' which consists of four functions: the 'onset' of the monster (the establishment of its existence to the audience, but not the protagonists); the 'discovery' of the monster by the protagonists; 'confirmation' of the monster (the protagonists must prove its existence to authoritative figures); and finally, 'confrontation' with the monster, whereby it may or may not be vanquished (1990: 99-103). This is a development from Carroll's earlier work in which he outlined the 'discovery plot', identical to the 'complex discovery plot' but for the exclusion of 'confirmation' (1981: 23). It is actually this earlier, less detailed 'discovery plot' that is more applicable to children's horror.

It is often impossible for 'confirmation' to take place in the children's horror narrative due to the nature of authoritative figures being unavailable, unable or unwilling to help. This trope is used for comedic effect in *Hocus Pocus*, in which a group of children and teens on Halloween night accidentally bring three evil witches back from the dead. They attempt to enlist the help of a man who they assume is a police officer, but unbeknownst to them is actually an ordinary man in a convincing Halloween costume. The man plays into the mistake before dismissing the children, who leave with dejection, and laughing about it with his girlfriend. The children are also unable to get help from their parents, who have been put under a spell by the witches. 'Confirmation' is present in *Monster House*, but only to reinforce the ineffectuality of authority figures and to leave the 'confrontation' to the child characters. With their parents away for the weekend and their babysitter uninterested in their warnings,

the three child protagonists attempt to notify the police about the monstrous house in their neighbourhood. The officers, who are presented as buffoons, begin to investigate as a way of humouring the children, but when they are 'eaten' by the monster house they provide 'confirmation' of its threat and leave the 'confrontation' to the children.

Just as Tudor provides the qualifier that his basic horror narrative structure can 'be realised in a variety of ways', Carroll's '(complex) discovery plot' can form a multitude of different horror plots by dropping one or more of the functions and/or shuffling their order. He cites the science-fiction-horror hybrid *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956) as an example of what he terms the 'confirmation plot', in which the monster is confirmed by the authorities but no confrontation takes place within the narrative (1990: 110). Following the BBFC's stipulation that horror in children's films should be followed by reassurance, and that it is generally a widely held belief that children's stories should have happy, or at least resolved endings, most if not all children's horror films provide some form of closure. As such, Carroll's 'confirmation' horror plot that ends without the confrontation and destruction of the monster does not apply to children's horror films. *The Monster Squad*, *The Gate*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Coraline* and *Monster House* are all children's horror films that end either with the total destruction of the monster or the trapping of it in a secure place (e.g. another dimension) from where it cannot return. A third ending, as seen in *The Hole*, *Goosebumps* (Letterman, 2015) and *The Witches*, entails the destruction of the monster with an indication that it will return, or the destruction of the 'main' monster, leaving other, less threatening monsters to be taken care of. These films' resolutions, far from being distressing, indicate that the protagonist(s) now have the appropriate strength, knowledge and resources to successfully combat any remaining threat they encounter. This concurs with Natalie Babbitt's argument that children's stories do not necessarily have to have wholly happy endings, but should at least end with a feeling of hope (1970: 7).

Hope is even more important to a fourth type of ending which occurs in children's horror films that take a sympathetic approach to monsters or others who do not fit within the societal 'norm'. In these films, which include *The Little Vampire*, *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie*, the monster is not destroyed but accepted or redeemed in some way. As the first two of these films are discussed at length in Chapter Three, the remainder of this chapter attends to *Frankenweenie* in further detail. Disney's *Frankenweenie* is a loose adaptation of Universal's 1931 *Frankenstein*, with references to other Universal monster films of the 1930s to 1950s. This history of children's horror films began by discussing how *Frankenstein* exhibits an appeal to children, but is not necessarily a 'children's horror film'. To bring this history full circle, I will briefly demonstrate how *Frankenweenie* adapts the *Frankenstein* narrative and exhibits the defining characteristics of children's horror in order to remain simultaneously 'horrific' and 'child-friendly'. The presence of these characteristics in *Frankenweenie* indicates that the film specifically addresses children in a way that *Frankenstein* does not.

Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*, released in 2012, is a feature-length, stop-motion animated adaptation of Burton's 1984 live-action short film of the same name. The setting moves from eighteenth century Europe in *Frankenstein* to contemporary suburban America in *Frankenweenie*. Dr Henry Frankenstein, the megalomaniacal scientist who pushes ethical boundaries so that he may 'know what it feels like to be God', becomes Victor Frankenstein (Charlie Tahan), a sympathetic and well-meaning boy with a love of science. The tragically misunderstood and victimised Monster of *Frankenstein*, comprised of body parts from various cadavers and the 'abnormal' brain of a criminal, becomes Sparky, Victor's beloved and deceased dog who Victor resurrects out of grief after Sparky is hit by a car. These changes alone demonstrate how the story, characters and thematic concerns have been altered in order to bear greater relevance and suitability to the presumed child audience.

In *Frankenweenie* Victor succeeds in resurrecting Sparky, who in 'undead' is the same affectionate dog he was in life, and they are delighted to be reunited. Unfortunately, other people do not feel the same way. In a partial re-enactment of *Frankenstein*, the frightened and angry townspeople chase Victor and Sparky to a miniature golf course where they hide inside a replica windmill. The windmill is set on fire by accident and Victor becomes unconscious after falling. Sparky rescues Victor but is killed (again) when he is crushed by the burning windmill. Having seen that Sparky is a gentle creature, the townspeople revive him once again by collectively sourcing the appropriate amount of electricity from their car batteries. This fulfils the need for children's horror films to have a happy ending, but crucially, the film also includes a moral lesson for Victor, and by extension children in the presumed audience, concerning something that they might encounter in their own lives: grief. After Sparky's second 'death' at the end of the film Victor is finally able to come to terms with this loss in a way he could not before, as his earlier inability to accept the death of his beloved pet is what led him to resurrect Sparky. It is therefore important that it is only *after* Victor has accepted Sparky's second 'death' that he is rewarded with Sparky being resurrected once again. Another moral is enforced via a sub-plot in which Victor's classmates discover what he has done and attempt to resurrect their own pets. Like Dr Frankenstein in the 1931 film, they are doing so not out of love and grief, like Victor, but out of greed, as they wish to win the school science fair. As a result of these immoral ambitions their pets are resurrected as monstrous abominations that proceed to wreak havoc on the town.

*Frankenweenie's* ending is obviously a drastic departure from *Frankenstein*, which ends with the death of the monster at the hands of the angry villagers. Here it is important to point out that *Frankenweenie* adheres not to Carroll's 'discovery plot' but his alternative 'overreacher plot' that applies to science-fiction-horror hybrids like *Frankenstein*. The phases of Carroll's 'overreacher plot' are: preparation for the experiment; the experiment itself; the



experiment goes awry; the monster that resulted from the experiment is confronted and possibly destroyed (1990: 120). What is interesting about *Frankenweenie's* adherence to this structure is that the latter two phases only apply to the aberrant pets of the rival children which are destroyed one-by-one, allowing the original creation, Sparky, to live with Victor 'happily ever after'. In this way, the narrative adheres to the 'overreacher plot' even while deviating from *Frankenstein* by emphasising the importance of love, friendship, acceptance, and the ethical use of science. In this way, the film is able to remain recognisably 'horrific' while also being 'suitable' for a child audience, again demonstrating the 'possibility' of children's horror.

With a brief history of children's horror and a working definition of the children's horror film established, this thesis will next turn to a review of scholarly literature.

## Chapter Two

### Realms of Horror: review of scholarly literature

As there is little existing scholarly work on children's horror films, it is necessary to draw upon a variety of other fields in order to construct a critical framework for this thesis. The first section of this review concerns scholarship on the horror genre as it pertains to adults, especially works that argue that the horror genre is able to provide a therapeutic service for viewers by representing and working through repressed cultural fears. This leads into the second section, which attends to works which argue that some forms of children's fiction pre-dating film, such as the fairy tale, similarly allow children to work through their fears and anxieties. Finally, this leads to an overview of the few existing works that discuss horror in contemporary children's film and literature and how this thesis is situated among them.

#### Horror: approaches and pleasures

Academic criticism on the horror genre is incredibly vast, and to accurately survey all areas of it without oversimplification would be impossible within the boundaries of this thesis. In Chapter One I attended to the key works of scholarly literature that tell us what the horror film *is*, and used these to come to a working definition of the children's horror film. This review therefore covers the key scholarly works that tell us what the horror film *does*. In line with the title of this thesis, the focus is on works which discuss the horror film's key emotional responses of fear and pleasure.

The two main approaches to the horror genre are the socio-historical and the psychoanalytical. Though in many ways different, they share the fact that they each attempt to 'explain the monster'. Socio-historical approaches tend to read the monster as a

representation of an anxiety stemming from the time and culture in which a film is made. For example, Siegfried Kracauer and David J. Skal read 1920s German and US horror films, respectively, in their post-World War I production contexts. For Kracauer, the zombie-like sleepwalker who commits murders under the control of a maniacal doctor in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1920) represents the German nation's obedience to, and failure to rebel against, tyrannical authority (Kracauer, 1947: 61-76). Skal meanwhile reads the distorted bodies of Lon Chaney's characters in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Worsley, 1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (Julian, 1925) as resonating with what he terms 'mutilation anxiety' evoked by the return of maimed soldiers after the war (1995: 65-69).

Psychoanalytic readings of horror films are generally ahistorical, instead tying the monster to 'universal' anxieties that lurk in the unconscious mind. As discussed in the Introduction, Chapter Five of this thesis is strongly informed by the uncanny, and indeed the uncanny is particularly useful for analysing horror given the concept's Freudian associations with the strange, the unsettling and that which evokes fear, anxiety and dread (Freud, 1919: 124-25). Psychoanalysis has also notably been used in feminist readings of horror, such as the works of Carol J. Clover (1992) and Barbara Creed (1986 and 1993), which are drawn upon in Chapters Four and Five. With regards to the slasher subgenre, Clover reads male serial killer characters as being driven by repressed sexual energy, or 'psychosexual fury' (1992: 27). The killer directs this energy into the brutal murder of young, typically sexually active women by killing them with a weapon of phallic symbolism, such as a knife (*ibid.*: 31-33). The victims are therefore 'punished' for their transgressive sexuality, leaving the virginal female protagonist, who Clover terms the 'Final Girl', to defeat the killer (*ibid.*: 39). Creed has a different take on horror's staging of female sexuality as punishable. Drawing on Kristeva's notion of the abject as 'what disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules' (1982: 4), Creed argues that films such as *The Exorcist*

(Friedkin, 1973) and *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) evoke horror by depicting female sexuality as transgressive and terrifying, which she terms the 'monstrous feminine', and the failure of patriarchal authority to contain it (Creed, 1993). For Creed, therefore, the 'ideological project' of the horror film is to construct the feminine as that which 'must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order' (1986: 70). An issue with this sort of reading, and indeed with psychoanalytic theory, is that it constructs female sexuality as the 'other' to the 'norm' of male sexuality, the model viewer of the horror film as male, and female sexuality as inherently terrifying within patriarchal discourse. And yet, that the Hollywood film industry, including children's horror films, is overwhelmingly dominated by male creators makes Creed's work particularly useful for understanding the representations of monstrous female villains in some of the films discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

There are further flaws with both the psychoanalytic and socio-historical approaches. Psychoanalysis has been widely contested in the field of psychiatry (Cherry, 2009: 101), though this has not stunted its popularity in Film Studies, particularly in relation to horror. While this popularity has inspired a range of 'productive readings of various horror films and cycles', such those of Clover and Creed (*ibid.*: 101), this same popularity has also resulted in a diverse range of approaches that are often contradictory (Schneider, 2004: 2). For example, Schneider (2004: 3-4) points out that while Creed argues that 'the horror film is populated by female monsters' (1993: 1), Stephen Neale's position drawn from psychoanalysis is that horror's monsters are typically male as their objects of desire and victims are usually women (1980: 60-61). Culturally or historically-specific readings, meanwhile, face the danger of implying that certain films are only effective when viewed within the context in which they are made if these readings are absent of acknowledgement of the ways that aesthetics and form also work to evoke horror. Cherry therefore suggests that psychoanalytical and socio-historical approaches to horror work best in tandem with

each other: 'What works as horror [...] can undoubtedly be explained theoretically in a number of ways', but it is also important to 'consider horror cinema historically and culturally in order to determine how the horror film reflects and addresses the anxieties of the age' (2009: 167). My approach follows in this vein by being predominantly textual but also carefully applying psychoanalytic concepts (namely, the monstrous feminine in Chapters Four and Five and the uncanny in Chapter Five) and analyses of socio-historical contexts and paratexts depending on which approach is the most effective for understanding individual texts, and trends across different texts and socio-historical periods.

A dual socio-historical and psychoanalytical approach is employed by Wood in his essay 'The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s' (2003: 63-84). Reflecting on this in his foreword to *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare* (ed. Schneider, 2004), Wood acknowledges that Freudian theory is 'vulnerable to attack on many points', but one of these points is not the 'return of the repressed' (2004: xv). He argues that this concept, which is the basis for 'The American Nightmare', 'offers us a means toward a political categorization of horror movies' (2003: 170). Wood's essay begins by outlining two forms of repression: 'basic' and 'surplus'. Basic repression is 'universal, necessary, and inescapable. It is what makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming and convulsions into a human being' (ibid.: 63). More central to Wood's theory of horror is surplus repression, which is where socio-historical significance applies, as it is 'specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture', i.e. it 'makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists' (ibid.: 63-64). What is repressed is therefore anything (or anyone) that opposes this aim, or which Wood refers to as 'otherness': 'that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it' (ibid.: 65-66). Where this becomes relevant to the horror genre is in

Wood's argument that the genre represents 'otherness' as monstrosity which temporarily invades normality and subverts social norms.

Wood identifies eight groups of cultural 'other' which form the basis of monsters in the horror genre: other people, women, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups within a specific culture, alternative ideologies or political systems, deviations of the sexual norm, and children (ibid.: 66-67). Obviously, the most significant of these groups to this thesis is children: both children presented in the horror genre as monstrous, demonic or uncanny beings, or monsters who function as metaphorical children (e.g. Frankenstein's Monster). As is discussed in the opening of Chapter Three, children's status as 'others' crosses historical and cultural boundaries, but their presentation as monstrous in horror has been interpreted in a number of ways depending on the socio-historical context of the text in question; as such they can be read through both the psychoanalytical and socio-historical approaches to horror. However these readings, in referring to *adult* horror films, overlook the possible function of monstrous children in *children's* horror films. Wood's emphasis on surplus repression also overlooks the function of basic repression in horror. This is especially pertinent to the children's horror film given that as children are not yet adults, they are theoretically still undergoing the process of basic repression. This brings us to the notion of pleasure, the second central concept to this thesis alongside fear. It is of particular importance to Chapter Three, which argues that rather than sources of *fear* which must be destroyed, monstrous children in children's horror films function as sources of *pleasure* in that they allow the child audience to enjoy the subversive spectacle of unruly children acting up, giving into basic instincts that are usually repressed, and reversing the hierarchy of adult dominance over children. However, the presentation of children as 'othered' beings is also proposed in Chapter Three to provide a form of catharsis in allowing child viewers to confront anxieties regarding their own 'othered' or 'monstrous' natures.

The notion of horror as cathartic implies that it is 'beneficial' as well as both fearful and pleasurable, and that these functions are often linked. The body of literature on the pleasures and functions of horror is vast and complex, so the remainder of this discussion summarises some of the key, interrelated arguments which are of the most relevance to this thesis. Carroll's answer to the 'paradox of horror', i.e. why we deliberately watch something that evokes the negative emotions of fear and disgust, is that these responses are the 'price to pay' to experience the key pleasure of horror, which is in experiencing the resolution of a narrative (1990: 181-82). Certainly, as discussed in Chapter One, the successful resolution of a narrative and either the destruction or acceptance of the monster is key to the children's horror film. Yet as argued there, disgust is not a necessary evil of the horror film but a pleasure in itself, especially in children's horror. In relation to this, some argue that the attraction of horror is that it allows us to revel in sadomasochistic and other morally unacceptable desires (Williams, 1991: 9), or as put by Tudor, it appeals to the "'beast" concealed within the superficially civilized human' (1997: 445). This chimes with descriptions of children as 'partly savage' (Lurie, 1990: ix) or 'semicivilised' (Roald Dahl in West, 1990: 116) and relates to the above suggestion that depictions of monstrous children are appealing because they allow the assumed child spectator to revel in their unruly behaviour. Horror therefore theoretically provides a beneficial function in that it allows viewers to 'purge' their socially unacceptable instincts, such as violent behaviour, and eliminate the need for them to be enacted in reality.

The subversive pleasure of revelling in 'unacceptable' behaviour dovetails with arguments that horror is appealing because it allows us to experience events or emotions that are a core part of the human condition, and that about which we are inherently curious, but would never want to experience in reality. As Aaron Smuts reasons, to experience these in reality would only result from situations too dangerous or tragic, such as injury or death of oneself or a loved one, to make the emotional result pleasurable or 'worth it' (2007: 74).

James B. Twitchell describes this pleasure via the analogy of a roller coaster (1985: 65). Tatar similarly suggests that 'looking at images of [fictional] horror allows the viewer to experience the "thrill" of being frightened in a *safe* zone where no one gets hurt' (2009: 84; my emphasis). That the experience is 'safe' recalls the conflicting viewpoints of Newman and Buckingham, who respectively see the 'safeness' of children's horror as either a fatal flaw that makes it redundant, or as providing children with an important outlet in which to explore fear and anxiety. Whichever it is, the consensus is that safety is a key characteristic of horror in general, but especially children's horror.

The arguments that horror is a safe space for confronting and exploring negative emotions, and/or that it provides an outlet in which to revel in our animalistic base instincts, overlap in the final possible function of horror to be addressed in this section. This is that it provides a psychologically beneficial or therapeutic function. If according to Wood the horror film allows the expression of our repressed feelings in the form of the monstrous 'other', it also allows for them to be confronted. Clover likewise attributes the cultural significance of horror to its 'engagement of repressed fears and desires and its reenactment of the residual conflict surrounding those feelings' (1992: 11). Interestingly, King refers to this via the metaphor of horror stories as 'leeches of the psyche' which draw out 'not bad blood but anxiety' (1981: 228). This implies that horror functions as a pseudo-medical 'cure'. Watching horror therefore theoretically results in a feeling of catharsis and relief at our 'nightmares' having been sucked out and presented in symbolic form for us to experience and 'overcome'. This process is literally enacted in children's horror film *The Hole*, discussed in Chapter Five, in which three children are haunted by physical manifestations of their repressed fears. Only by confronting and battling these fears can the children overcome them. The supposedly therapeutic function of horror is explored further below in relation to the fairy tale. This section also addresses another function of horror relevant to this thesis: that of pedagogy.



## Tales of Terror: pedagogy and therapy in precursors to the children's horror film

A discussion of the children's horror film and the extent to which it is 'beneficial' cannot take place without acknowledging the role of horror in forms of children's culture that pre-date cinema. Reynolds points out that these include many seemingly innocuous forms, including nursery rhymes, lullabies and even religious texts (2005: 151), but this review focuses on the two forms that have received the most scholarly attention to date, especially in relation to their apparently beneficial aspects: the fairy tale and cautionary tale.

Although fairy tales were not initially created with children in mind as their core audience, they gradually came to be considered as a staple of children's literature. Due to this association with children, some of the tales' horrific elements were excised, and have been sanitised to an even greater extent in contemporary versions and adaptations such as those of the Disney studio. Yet as highlighted in Chapter One with regards to Disney's *Snow White*, the 'child-friendly' versions of fairy tales from the Grimms onwards still retain frightening elements that allow them to be considered precursors to the children's horror film. Indeed, many of the gruesome elements and themes of classic fairy tales are present in contemporary children's horror films. One of these explored in detail throughout this thesis is children who are endangered by predatory strangers or their own parents.

Fairy tales and children's horror films are also structurally similar. This brings us to one of the major scholarly works on fairy tales, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Based on a survey of Russian folk tales, Propp identifies thirty-one recurring narrative elements, called 'functions' (1968: 25-65), and seven character types or 'dramatis personae' (ibid.: 80-81). The presence of these functions and characters in the children's horror film – such as a hero/heroine, a villain, and the provision or receipt of a magical agent – allows Propp's model to be applied to the subgenre. However, Propp's framework has also been criticised for being 'too general such that his structure can be applied to any narrative' (Jones,

1995: 14-15). Indeed, it is very similar to the hero's journey, also known as monomyth, developed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).<sup>1</sup> Yet that Propp's framework is so widely applicable arguably cements the importance of the fairy tale form and the influence that its narrative structures, character types, and motifs have had on other forms of storytelling since – including horror films for both adults and children.

Many scholars have noted the similarities between the (adult) horror film and the fairy tale. As noted in Chapter One, Carroll is one of them. Others include Mikel Koven (2008) and Walter Rankin (2007), who both argue that the violent elements of classic fairy tales lends them easily to modern retellings as horror films. In addition to sharing some similarities in plot, theme and violence, Koven and Rankin are agreed that fairy tales and horror films are united by their uses of violence to deliver a moral. This similarity is the basis for Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures*, in which he argues that horror films are to the sexually-maturing adolescent what fairy tales are to the child; as fairy tales 'prepare the child for the anxieties of separation, modern horror myths prepare the teenager for the anxieties of reproduction' (1985: 7). However, while horror has a clear fairy tale heritage, the pedagogic elements of horror that Koven, Rankin and Twitchell identify arguably link the horror film less to the fairy tale than to another, albeit similar early form of children's literature, the cautionary tale. I intend to explore the importance of the fairy tale and its 'benefits' below, but first this discussion indulges a brief diversion into cautionary tale format and its relevance to the children's horror film.

While fairy tales often prescribe a moral message, they arguably do so in a way that is far less overt and didactic than the cautionary tale. According to Peter Hunt, this is a result

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<sup>1</sup> The monomyth is a broad narrative template that can be applied to countless fictional stories in which a hero goes on an adventure, achieves a great victory and returns home transformed, with various other events occurring in between these three major stages, such as encountering the 'mentor' figure. The outline is often presented as a circle in order to reflect the circular nature of the hero's journey.

of the cautionary tale having developed out of religious children's texts that '[assumed] that the child was a damned soul from birth, who needed to be saved' (1994: 38-39). As such, cautionary tales were thought to be strictly educational as the idea of children reading for pleasure was considered abhorrent (ibid.). One of the most notable collections of cautionary tales for children is Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845), including such tales as 'The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb' (ibid.: 15-16) in which a boy's thumbs are brutally chopped off with shears as punishment for his refusal to stop sucking them. Tatar reads these tales as seeking to 'instrumentalize narrative violence in order to discipline and socialize children in the name of guiding and healing them' (1998: 71). Thus we return, not for the last time in this review, to the notion of horror as a 'cure', though this time for bad behaviour rather than for fear or anxiety. We can see the cautionary tale format's prescribing of a moral continued in contemporary children's horror texts, notably the animated television series *Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids* (ITV: 1999-), in which each episode tells a story about naughty children who by the end learn a lesson via particularly 'gruesome' means. The episode 'The Barber of Civil' (1.9, tx. 28/02/2000), for example, repurposes 'The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb' into a tale of two misbehaving children whose tongues are cut off to punish their cheekiness. Some have read contemporary adult horror films as repurposing and updating the cautionary tale format. Finn Ballard discusses the cautionary tale's influence on horror specifically with regards to road-horror films, like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), which he reads as a modern update of the *Warnmärchen* ('warning tale') 'Little Red Riding Hood': 'both are retellings of the archetypal tale of a young trespasser, in a threatening and disconcerting location, whose moral fortitude determines whether he or she will succeed in defeating a malevolent predator' (2008). Ballard outlines how contemporary road-horror films update the features of the *Warnmärchen* to better address the fears of their audience: rather than a devouring wolf, the villain of road-horror is a murderous

human, and the 'labyrinthine wood' of the *Warnmärchen* becomes 'an utterly open, vast, and unnavigable environment without recourse to modernity, technology or logic' (ibid.).

However, whether cautionary tales are intended to be purely didactic and scare the reader/viewer into submission is questionable, and returns us to one of the alternate pleasures of horror offered above. Barbara Smith Chalou reveals that, contrary to the popular belief that *Struwwelpeter* was a sincere attempt to socialise children, it was actually intended to provide them with an entertaining alternative to other heavily didactic texts on the market (2007: 24). Justine Gieni therefore argues that in appealing to children's sense of fun and fascination with violence and disgust, the tales are actually parodic and subversive (2016: 38). Indeed, children viewing 'The Barber of Civil' may be less likely to identify with the naughty children on screen and be scared into submission than they are to delight in the sadistic pleasure of seeing *other* children punished in humorously horrifying and disgusting ways. Yet there is a crucial difference between short-form cautionary tales and their feature-length filmic successors which are the focus of this thesis. Unlike *Struwwelpeter* and *Grizzly Tales*, in which each story or episode concerns different characters, most of whom are naughty children to be punished, children's horror films always contain a protagonist with whom the model child viewer is likely to identify. There may be secondary child characters who are positioned as antagonists – such as the bullies of the child protagonists in *ParaNorman*, *The Little Vampire* and *The Monster Squad* – whom we are clearly meant to enjoy seeing punished. Yet there is also always the protagonist who is generally moral and well-behaved, but learns a lesson of their own – one that is less overtly pedagogic than those presented by cautionary tales and their descendants (though pedagogic elements are still present), but which often relates more abstractly to achieving emotional growth and overcoming existential crises. This brings the discussion to one of the seminal theories of the 'beneficial' function of fairy tales and horror in the lives of children.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, his psychoanalytic reading of the importance of fairy tales to children, Bettelheim echoes arguments that horror allows us to confront, manage and overcome our fears: 'a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, [...] but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious' (1976: 8). Bettelheim believes that fairy tales provide this function for children by 'depict[ing] in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence' (ibid.: 73). This includes overcoming negative impulses, existential anxieties and moral dilemmas. His thesis is well illustrated by his reading of 'Hansel and Gretel' (ibid.: 159-66). Bettelheim argues that eating the gingerbread house and evoking the wrath of the witch who lives there is a beneficial experience that allows Hansel and Gretel to recognise and overcome their 'untamed id impulses', i.e. greed and aggression. Only the witch, who wishes to eat the children, surpasses their greed. By destroying her, Hansel and Gretel therefore 'purge' and overcome their own negative impulses and are rewarded with their happy return home. Of utmost importance are two elements: first, that the witch who symbolised Hansel and Gretel's worst tendencies has been defeated, thus enforcing moral values and comforting the child reader that evil has been defeated; second, that although order has been restored and on a surface level nothing has changed, in fact 'all has changed' because Hansel and Gretel's 'inner attitudes have changed' (ibid.: 165). As is discussed throughout the following chapters, the child characters of most of the films discussed in this thesis go through very similar arcs of overcoming not just their fears, but also their negative impulses that prevent them from achieving independence, maturity and satisfaction with their lives.

Bettelheim asserts that fairy tales are unique in providing this beneficial function for children due to their simple narratives and characters who are 'typical rather than unique' (ibid.: 8). This draws a link to Propp's basic functions and character types of the fairy tale, yet as discussed above, Propp's framework can be applied to many other types of stories than

the fairy tale alone, including contemporary children's horror films. Bettelheim also believes that modern children's stories avoid addressing the 'basic human predicaments' and are thus 'safe' (ibid.: 7-8). This is interesting considering my arguments earlier in this review and in the Introduction that it is precisely the perceived safety of children's horror films that is important. Yet in many ways they are also *not* safe due to their evocation of feelings of fear and their addressing of some of the darker aspects of life; what is darker for a child, for instance, than one's parents being killed, as in *The Witches*, or being pursued by one's abusive father, as in *The Hole*? These factors undermine the importance that Bettelheim places upon the fairy tale and his dismissal of children's stories in other media, such as film and television, where he believes 'fairy tales are turned into empty-minded entertainment' (ibid.: 24). Karen Coats agrees that twentieth and twenty-first century culture has 'degraded these once psychically useful tales' (2008: 79). Coats suggests that this sanitisation has allowed contemporary Gothic children's literature to take the place of the fairy tale in helping children work through their anxieties, and I would suggest that the children's horror film is able to serve this function in the cinematic sphere given the thematic, horrific and structural similarities between classic fairy tales and contemporary children's horror films. However, Bettelheim remains adamant that it is only the tales in their 'original' recorded forms that are significant.

This brings us to one of the major criticisms of Bettelheim's work. The origins of most classic fairy tales are unknown as they were communicated orally and shared between communities and generations long before they were recorded in text by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault and others.<sup>2</sup> As such there are multiple versions of the same tales from differing historical and cultural contexts, and they continue to change through adaptations and retellings. Robert Darnton reminds us of the importance of considering socio-historical

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<sup>2</sup> It is primarily the versions recorded by the Grimms and Perrault from which Bettelheim draws.

context in his accusation that Bettelheim reads fairy tales 'as if they had no history. [...] He does not question their origins or [...] other meanings they might have had in other contexts because he knows how the soul works and how it has always worked' (1984: 13). Although arguably many anxieties relating to childhood – such as separation anxiety – likely resonate with children across differing historical and cultural periods, this thesis contextualises readings of these anxieties, where relevant, in their socio-historical contexts in order to uncover how an individual text or group of texts 'reflects and addresses the anxieties of the age' in which they are made (Cherry, 2009: 167).

Bettelheim has also been criticised for his over-reliance on psychoanalysis in explaining the psychological ailments of children regardless of other factors such as their social background, race, class, age or gender (Zipes, 1979: 170). In particular, his readings of psychoanalytic concepts relating to sexuality into many tales, including castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex, have invited scepticism in relation to the extent to which these issues are expected to bear any relevance to children. Tatar, responding to Bettelheim's reading of 'Sleeping Beauty' as an analogy for a girl's first menstruation and sexual awakening (1976: 225-36), is of the view that while parents reading the tales to their children 'may have sex on their minds when they read about a princess who pricks her finger on a spindle, then falls into a deep sleep', children themselves are far less likely to make this association (Tatar, 1992: xxiii). Bettelheim has also been taken to task for ignoring many fairy tales' problematic aspects relating to gender. According to his reading, 'Cinderella' assists child readers in overcoming jealousy, sibling rivalry, Oedipal desires and aggression (1976: 236-77), to which some have responded by pointing out the tale's troubling gender politics, such as the heroine's passivity (Heisig, 1977: 110; Stone, 1985). Regardless of the positive lessons Bettelheim finds in fairy tales – or that I may identify in children's horror films – it is of great importance to also consider the problematic lessons that children may also take away from

them and what they reveal about the culture in which they were created. This issue is taken up in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis with regards to gender.

While Bettelheim's approach has clear faults, his central argument that fairy tales can assist child readers in overcoming their fears and anxieties is of great significance to this thesis as it continues to resonate in academic criticism of children's literature and culture. Even one of the most vocal of Bettelheim's detractors, Jack Zipes, echoes Bettelheim in his statement that fairy tales 'map out possible ways to attain happiness, to expose and resolve moral conflicts' and 'use fantastic and miraculous elements to prepare us for our everyday life' (2008). In relation to contemporary children's horror, Bettelheim's argument makes appearances in the edited collections *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (eds. Jackson et al, 2008) (specifically in Coats' essay referenced above) and *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture* (ed. McCort, 2016), both of which are addressed in further detail below. That fairy tales and horror stories are 'good' for children is a theme in several children's horror films, as argued in Chapter Three, and is also the central premise of the Gothic drama film *A Monster Calls* (Bayona, 2016). This portrays a boy, Conor (Lewis MacDougall) who is struggling to deal with the emotions he feels about his mother (Felicity Jones) being terminally ill. He is visited by a benevolent monster (Liam Neeson) who tells folkloric stories in order to help Conor work through his anger and grief. The belief that horror stories are beneficial to children is also held by several creators of children's horror stories (e.g. Higson, 2013). The most interesting articulation of this comes from Neil Gaiman, author of the novel upon which *Coraline* is based and many other Gothic-horror children's novels and retellings of fairy tales:

I think it is really important to show dark things to kids, and in the showing to also show that dark things can be beaten. That you have power. [...] It's like an inoculation (TOON Books, 2014)



Thus we circle back to the notion of fictional horror providing not just a benefit to children, but something akin to a medical 'cure' that will strengthen and protect them from 'real' horror. That the view that horror is 'good' for children is both expressed by the creators of children's horror and is present in many children's horror films lends credence to this argument.

### Horror in Contemporary Children's Culture

The final section of this review outlines the small body of work that addresses children's horror and Gothic fiction and situates my thesis among them. In the Introduction I have addressed the fact that most studies of the horror genre, or genre in general, fail to acknowledge the existence of either children's horror films or children's cinema entirely. Within the field of Film Studies, works on children's horror come in the form of single essays or chapters which focus on a specific text. These address aspects that are unrelated or tangential to the texts' generic context, such as their aesthetics and technological aspects (e.g. Higgins, 2012; Weetch, 2012 and 2013; Newton, 2015), or representations of gender (e.g. Bird, 1998; Mallan, 2000; Takolander, 2011). Others do discuss certain films as children's horror, but their status as short-form articles or chapters means that their focus is necessarily restricted to one or two texts (Howarth, 2014; Hawley, 2015), or they unfavourably compare a film with the novel from which it was adapted in ways that are disparaging to the horror genre and the filmic medium (Myers, 2012).

There is greater acknowledgement of children's horror as a distinct category or subgenre in studies of children's literature, with works such as *Hogwarts and All: Gothic Perspectives on Children's Literature* (Pepeitone, 2012), *Frightening Fiction* (Brennan et al, 2001), and the above-mentioned collections *The Gothic in Children's Literature* and *Reading in the Dark*. These provide a range of perspectives on horror or Gothic fiction for children,

but again they tend to address individual texts, authors or thematic elements. The only one of these to address film is Peter C. Kunze's essay in *Reading in the Dark* (2016), yet rather than discussing children's horror films it refers to *Shrek* (Adamson and Jenson, 2001) and *Monsters Inc.* (Docter, Silverman and Unkrich, 2001), which contain monsters as characters but are not 'horror' in any other sense. This body of disparate pieces on children's literature or individual film texts therefore leaves a gap for an extended study of children's horror in the medium of film. As such, this thesis both situates Hollywood children's horror films within their generic, industrial and historical contexts and examines the way that horror is created in these texts, including through strategies that are distinct to the audio-visual medium.

One long-form study of the children's horror film does already exist: the recently completed PhD thesis of Filipa Antunes titled *Children Beware! Children's horror, PG-13 and the emergent Millennial pre-teen* (2015). It is therefore of great importance that I situate my own work in relation to this. While we are agreed on some key points, like the implementation of the MPAA ratings system in 1968 being a turning point in the history of children's horror, and discuss some of the same films, like *Gremlins*, there are some crucial differences between our approaches, our corpus texts and period of study. Antunes does not refer to children's horror as a subgenre but rather a cycle of texts released between 1980 and 1995. Although she acknowledges that many children's horror films continue to be made – many of which are discussed in my thesis – she sees these as 'sporadic echoes' of earlier texts and of lesser interest than the 1980s and 1990s films of her study (ibid.: 38). This seems an unfair dismissal of these texts, which I consider as worthy of study in their own right and evidence of children's horror as a thriving, evolving and increasingly popular subgenre of film or trend in children's media culture more broadly. While I am fairly restrictive in my definition of children's horror films, Antunes opens her corpus to texts that may not have been addressed to children or have restrictive MPAA ratings, but which were popular with children nonetheless and which 'remain focused on questions of childhood, childhood boundaries

and parenting anxieties related to the on-set of puberty' (ibid.: 40). This relates to her approach, which is drawn from reception studies as Antunes is predominately concerned with cultural conceptions of the horror genre in relation to child audiences and how these are tied to conceptions of childhood, particularly the emergence of the pre-teen in the 1990s as a distinct category between childhood and adolescence. While these issues are also of interest here, as explained in the Introduction I am interested less in how children's horror films are received than in examining them textually in order to uncover what the texts themselves tell us about cultural conceptions of children and childhood. It is my hope that Antunes and I provide differing but complementary approaches to, and perspectives on, children's horror films in order to begin a dialogue in academy on this rich, fascinating and worthwhile subject.

## Chapter Three

### Little Nasties: the fear, loathing and subversive pleasure of the monstrous child

As discussed in Chapter Two, Wood identifies children as one of the horror film's groups of 'others' that are presented as figures to be feared (2003: 63-67). As Wood's essay refers only to adult horror films, this chapter attends to depictions of monstrous children in *children's* horror films. This discussion examines how the use of this well-worn horror trope is subverted when presented in films directed at an audience of children, so that rather than figures of fear these monstrous children become figures of pleasure and catharsis. First, Wood's statement needs unpacking in order to provide context for the discussion ahead.

The horror genre has a long history of depicting children as figures of evil or monstrosity, most notably in the late-1960s and 1970s in films including *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* (Donner, 1976). Many have attributed the popularity of the demon child motif in films of this period to socio-historical anxieties. Heffernan, as referenced in Chapter One, identifies the demon child motif as a major characteristic of the 'adult' horror film that he sees as emerging from 1968 onwards (concurrent with the abolition of the Production Code), and refers to Paul's proposition that the popularity of the demon child stems from contemporaneous anxiety concerning a loss of control of children (Heffernan, 2004: 185; Paul, 1994: 282). Skal takes a similar stance in reading the exorcism of the devil from Regan (Linda Blair) in *The Exorcist* as the exorcism of 'the confused parental feelings of guilt and responsibility in the Vietnam era, when [...] filthy-mouthed children were taking personality-transforming drugs, violently acting out, and generally making life unpleasant for their elders' (1995: 295). Wood reads the fear of the monstrous child in the 1970s as resonating with anxieties surrounding the instability of the nuclear family structure,

pinpointing *It's Alive* (Cohen, 1974), in which an affluent couple give birth to a deformed, blood-thirsty baby, as emblematic of this. Wood observes that before the birth the couple are 'seemingly delighted with their ideal arrangement', but beneath their 'strained cheerfulness' and outward complacency lurks inward tension, dissatisfaction, and the truth that they are 'profoundly incompatible'. This prompts Wood to ask, 'what but a "monster" could such a union ultimately produce?' (2003: 89).

That monstrous children of late-1960s and 1970s horror inspire such diverse readings indicates that, more than being tied to socio-historical anxieties, there is something about children and childhood that is inherently unsettling to adults. Monstrous children, whether literal or figurative, feature in film from as early as the emergence of sound horror cinema, notably the 1931 *Frankenstein*, and continue to appear with regularity, for example in *The Children* (Shankland, 2008) and *Orphan* (Collet-Serra, 2009). Paedophobia also recurs across different cultures, genres and media, as is effectively displayed by the diversity of subjects covered in *The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* (ed. Renner, 2013), from Bollywood cinema to reality television. Perhaps the ongoing exploitation of paedophobia can be attributed to the fact that children are inherently 'monstrous' due to their continual growing and changing, both mentally and physically. This aligns children with Carroll's definition of horror monsters as the result of the 'fusion' or transgression of categorical distinctions, as they blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, youth and age, and innocence and corruption (1990: 43).

This results in what James R. Kincaid refers to as a 'schizophrenic vision' of children (2015: 7). This can be seen in the way that children are referred to as 'little monsters, devils or beasts' as often as they are 'little angels' (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 1995: 1), and in conflicting views of the child in Christian thought: in some views, children are born with original sin from which they must be saved, but in others infants are incapable of sinning,

and only learn this ability as they mature under the influence of adult society (Bunge, 2001: 1-28). These opposing views are linked by the idea that the child must be ‘saved’ or ‘redeemed’ somehow from sin and corruption. However, there is also a self-serving adult interest in protecting the state of childhood, arising from the Romantic belief that ‘the qualities of childhood, if they could be preserved in adult-hood, might help redeem the adult world’ (Cunningham, 1995: 72). This strongly suggests that when we pertain to be ‘thinking of the children’, we are more likely to be thinking of ourselves.

Paul argues that this interest in protecting adults by controlling children is the driving force behind moral panics that have occurred throughout twentieth century US culture with regards to children becoming corrupted and uncontrollable – or in other words, monstrous – should they become exposed to ‘horrific’ media (1994: 277). These moral panics provide important context for this chapter, especially Wertham’s claims (1948 and 1954) that the violent imagery in 1950s horror comic books caused juvenile delinquency. Wertham’s concerns were rejuvenated in the 1990s in debates surrounding the *Goosebumps* series of children’s horror novels by R.L. Stine, which some feared would ‘get [children] interested in evil, wicked things’ or were from the Devil himself (in Tanner, 2010: 5).<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the Introduction, anxieties such as these had little evidence to support them. They may also reveal a fear *of* children just as much as, if not more than, a desire to protect them. Ironically, calls for censorship that often accompany these debates tend to overlook that the restriction of access to an item often makes it more desirable. This is expressed with admirable stubbornness by David Pace Wigransky, a child respondent to Wertham’s criticisms of comic books. ‘If a child is told not to read a comic book’, argued the fourteen-year-old Wigransky, ‘he will break his neck to do it’ (1948: 20). Echoing Bettelheim’s sentiments on the ‘benefits’ of fairy tales, as summarised in Chapter Two, Wigransky argued that children should not be

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<sup>1</sup> For further details and discussion on the *Goosebumps* debate see Heidi Anne Mesmer (1998) and Nicole Tanner (2010).

kept in 'utter and complete ignorance of anything and everything except the innocuous and sterile world that the Dr. Werthams of the world prefer to keep them prisoners within from birth to maturity' as this will leave them unprepared to deal with 'a world of violence and cruelty' (ibid.).

Wigransky's impassioned defence of horror comics anticipates Buckingham's 1996 empirical study on children's responses to adult horror films, which reveals the pleasure and potential long-term benefits that children gain from watching horror. Buckingham also posits that the extent to which children are adversely affected by watching horror depends upon 'the social contexts in which they watch and subsequently talk about it with others' (1996: 136). Wigransky's letter and the research of Buckingham indicates that rather than shield children from violent or horrific content altogether, there lies a responsibility with adults to respect children's desires to engage with it and assist them in understanding it in order to prevent them from becoming 'monstrous'. It is important to keep in mind that, as with negative side-effects, the potential benefits of horror remain unproven. What *does* matter here is that this sentiment is also expressed by the films discussed in this chapter, as is explored in each of the below case studies. As such, these texts are not only horror films that address child viewers, but they also engage child viewers in a dialogue about the fun that watching horror can be, how doing so can be used to come to terms with one's own 'monstrosity', and they function as guides on how children can watch horror safely.

Echoing Buckingham, one of the ways these texts suggest children can watch horror safely is in the company of an adult guardian, thus placing a portion of responsibility with adults. However, moral panics surrounding children's exposure to horror, as well as the trope of the demonic child in horror, show that as much as adult society might tie its societal worth to its success in protecting children from horror, it also denies responsibility for their 'corruption' and attempts as much as possible to shift the blame somewhere else: whether

to comics, films, or the Devil himself. This denial of the responsibility of adults for the unruliness of children can be seen in particular in *Gremlins*, as is explored in detail below.

As this discussion has indicated so far, the fears of the monstrous child both within horror films and in reality have significant overlaps, particularly due to concerns of adults that children's consumption of horror will turn them into monstrous delinquents that resemble the representations of evil children in adult horror films. This overlap chimes with the fact that this chapter has two dovetailing aims. The first is to explore the presentation of the monstrous child within horror films for children and to note how these representations have changed over time, and how they differ from the presentations of monstrous children in adult horror films. This discussion shows that depictions of and attitudes toward monstrous children in children's horror become more sympathetic and celebratory over time. Emerging from this discussion is this chapter's second aim, which is to examine changes in the form and reception of children's horror over time, from the troubled early years of the subgenre with the controversial *Gremlins* (Dante, 1984), to the much tamer *Hotel Transylvania* films (2012 and 15). The texts discussed in this chapter present childish monstrosity in varying positive lights, and aim to show that children's 'monstrosity' – including their consumption of horrific media – is normal and should be celebrated, and that those who fear and reject this 'monstrosity' are in the wrong.

### Fear and Destruction of the Monstrous Child in *Gremlins*

*Gremlins* takes place at Christmas, when a struggling inventor named Randall Peltzer (Hoyt Axton) gives an unusual Christmas gift to his son, Billy (Zach Galligan), that he bought in Chinatown. This gift is a mogwai – a teddy-bear-like creature that is as cute as it is mysterious – which they name Gizmo. Gizmo comes with three rules: keep him away from light, especially sunlight as it will kill him; keep him away from water; and never feed him after



midnight. Of course, these rules are broken over the course of the narrative. Artificial light hurts Gizmo, and when exposed to water he spawns further mogwai who are almost identical to him in appearance, but more mischievous in temperament. These new mogwai trick Billy into feeding them after midnight, causing them to transform into malicious, reptilian creatures: gremlins. The gremlins proceed to wreak havoc upon the film's setting, the fictional town of Kingston Falls. Throughout the film Gizmo remains a cuddly and good-natured creature, and assists Billy and his love interest Kate (Phoebe Cates) in killing the gremlins and preventing them from multiplying further. The last remaining gremlin, Stripe, meets a gruesome end when the sun rises and kills him.

*Gremlins* may be considered an anomaly in the corpus texts of this thesis, primarily because its status as a *children's* horror film can be contested. This is chiefly due to controversy surrounding the film's original US release in 1984. A preliminary discussion of this provides valuable extra-textual context for the themes within the film and contributes to this chapter's interest in attitudes toward children's consumption of horrific material and the fear of them becoming 'monstrous' should they be exposed to it. In addition, that it plays a key role in development of children's horror in Hollywood cinema, as explained in Chapter One, makes it appropriate as the first case study for this thesis.

### **Suitable for children? *Gremlins'* misleading marketing and classification**

*Gremlins'* questionable status as a children's film is displayed by the difference in ratings between the US and UK classifications boards: the MPAA rated it PG in the US, while the BBFC rated it 15. In addition to the film's PG label in the US, its marketing materials contributed towards the misconception of the film as child-friendly entertainment. Jonathan Gray emphasises the importance of promotional materials and other paratexts in explaining that films 'often begin long before we actively seek them out', as the information we receive about a text *before* seeing it, namely through posters and trailers, is as crucial to the

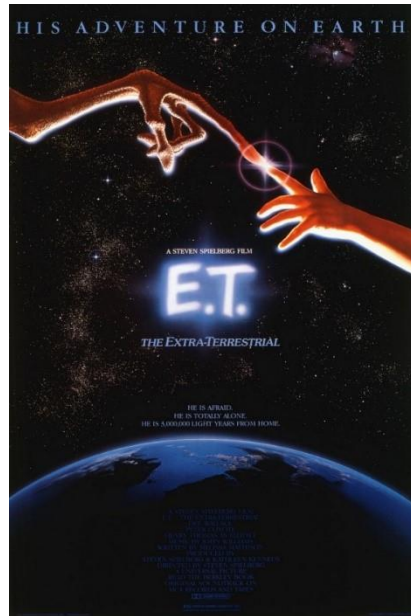


Figure 3.1: *E.T. theatrical poster* (Alvin, 1982).

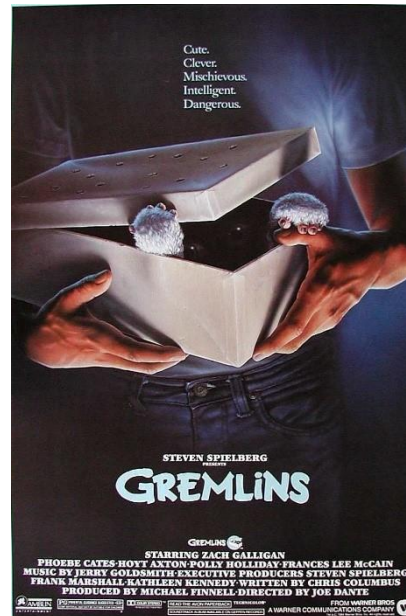


Figure 3.2: *Gremlins theatrical poster* (Alvin, 1984).

construction of a text's meaning as the text itself (2010: 47-48). The significance of *Gremlins'* marketing materials in contributing to the film's construction of meaning therefore cannot be overstated. *Gremlins* was marketed heavily in the US as a family-friendly film akin to *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), directed by Spielberg, who also executive-produced *Gremlins*. *Gremlins'* director Joe Dante has acknowledged the similarity between the *Gremlins* and *E.T.* marketing campaigns, particularly in the colour and style of the posters, which were both designed by John Alvin ('Filmmakers Commentary...', 2014) (Figures 3.1-3.2). Spielberg's name is also featured prominently on both the poster and trailer: 'Steven Spielberg presents *Gremlins'* ('Theatrical Trailer', 2014). But it is the merchandise associated with *Gremlins* that most clearly signified in the US that it was suitable for children. According to Gray, a film's 'peripherals', such as toys and other ancillary tie-in products, play a crucial role in contributing to a text's overall meaning and reception (2010: 175). The wealth of *Gremlins* merchandise produced was largely made up of children's products, including soft toys, lunchboxes and a novelty cereal. Furthermore, some adverts for these products made a link between children and the gremlins. The advert for *Gremlins* cereal (Ralston, 1984) asks the viewer, 'Are you hungry? Hungry as a... gremlin?' and shows children with the recognisable

gremlin ears which disappear after they have eaten the cereal, thus implying that a gremlin is no more harmful than a hungry child (Figure 3.3). Another advert for the fast-food chain Hardee's promoted a set of read-along audio books which tell the story of the film (Hardee's, 1984). The advert is set to lullaby-esque music and shows two young children reading together in a tent in a suburban garden with a white picket fence (Figure 3.4). A non-diegetic choir of children sing, 'You love Gizmo and Gizmo loves you'. The saccharine and idealised view of childhood and American family values presented is very much at odds with the content and tone of the film.



Figure 3.3: *Gremlins cereal advert.*



Figure 3.4: *Hardee's advert for Gremlins tie-in products.*

In light of this oblique marketing strategy, it is understandable that some American parents believed that the film would be suitable for children and why they were then shocked at the film's violent content and dark, satirical tone which attacks core American, Regan-era values such as the infallibility of the nuclear family and the sanctity of Christmas. These objectionable qualities are exemplified by the film's two most notorious scenes: firstly, a scene set in the a family kitchen in which three gremlins are brutally dispatched by a housewife, and secondly, a scene in which Kate recalls that as a nine-year-old she found her father dead dressed as Santa (as he had been intending to surprise her on Christmas morning by climbing down the chimney). Her story concludes '...and that's how I found out there's no Santa Claus', presumably revealing the truth about Santa to many child viewers.

Due to the dark tone and violent content in both *Gremlins* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (also released in the summer of 1984, PG-rated and associated with Spielberg, who directed it), theatre owners reported that parents who took their children to see these films felt that their “faith in the movie ratings system [had] been shaken” (Zoglin, 1984: 46). The MPAA’s response to this, spurred by a suggestion by Spielberg himself, was to introduce the PG-13 rating to signify some films as containing content that may not be suitable for young children but is also not objectionable enough to warrant an R rating. Despite the reference to the age of thirteen in the rating’s name, children under thirteen years of age are allowed to attend a PG-13 rated film unaccompanied by an adult. This makes the rating cautionary, rather than restrictive. Spielberg has aptly described the PG-13 as the PG rating with “a little hot sauce on top”, aimed at the pre-teen demographic who had outgrown G and PG-rated films which are typically associated with children’s fare, but were not yet old enough to see R-rated films at the cinema on their own (Higgins, 2016). The MPAA’s implementation of the PG-13 rating has had far-reaching consequences. As addressed in Chapter One, the increased flexibility that the rating offers filmmakers to produce horror films aimed at child audiences resulted in a number of PG-13-rated, child-centric horror films being released in the late-1980s such as *The Gate* and *The Monster Squad*, the latter of which is one of the case studies of Chapter Four. The PG-13 is thus a major landmark in the development of the subgenre and may have helped to make the idea of ‘children’s horror’ far more palatable to studios and audiences of Hollywood cinema.<sup>2</sup>

In the UK, the BBFC did not feel comfortable giving the film a PG rating, like their American counterparts, and so classified the film as 15, thus preventing anyone under that age from seeing it in the cinema and, by implication, labelling it as ‘not for children’. The BBFC’s reasoning is detailed in the original case notes and reflects many of the same concerns

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<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the introduction of the PG-13 rating and its effect on the horror genre and the catering of the pre-teen audience in late-1980s cinema, see Antunes (2014).

as American parents, as detailed above, particularly its violence and dark tone (BBFC, 1984). Why the MPAA felt it appropriate to classify the film PG and therefore suitable for most children, in contrast with the views of many parents and the BBFC, is not entirely clear. However, it is interesting to consider that the controversy in the US surrounding *Gremlins'* rating and content occurred concurrently with video nasty debate in the UK, mentioned in the Introduction, and the fear of violent content damaging children and bringing to the surface the 'monster' within. Given this cultural context it might be that the BBFC felt an urge to be particularly careful about giving a horror-comedy such as this a rating that would allow children to access it – however, this is only speculation. Nevertheless, the UK-centric anxieties concerning the video nasty debate, and Wertham's earlier concerns about comics – i.e. children imitating fictional media violence – were also present in some US criticism of *Gremlins*. Roger Ebert expressed having a 'queasy feeling' that children may try to replicate with their own pets the scene in which a gremlin is blown up in a microwave (1984), but there is no evidence to indicate that Ebert's worries were justified. It is arguable that the scene's graphic and realistic depiction of gore acts as a deterrent from imitating this behaviour, even if the scene's horror still holds an abject fascination. An anecdote from Dante reveals this childish fascination and echoes Wigransky's assertion that children will do anything to watch what they want, and will only be further incited by being forbidden:

After the microwave scene, some woman stormed out with her child. [...] The kid didn't want to go, and a couple of minutes went by, and the kid runs back in the theatre having apparently escaped her mother (in Klein, 2000)

Similarly, the gremlins within the film can be read as children who simply wish to defy adult figures of authority and revel in unruly, forbidden behaviour. This, in addition to the film's marketing strategy and paratexts, indicates an address to children and invites a reading of the child-like gremlins as figures of pleasure and catharsis, rather than figures of evil that monstrous children are usually presented as in adult horror. Furthermore, following from

the association between the gremlins, children and taboo content, *Gremlins* is read as an allegory for film censorship and classification that is in favour of children obtaining mediated access to horrific material, and in providing children with safe outlets, such as film viewing, in which to relish in the 'monstrous' side of themselves.

### **'Children of the night': *Gremlins* as carnivalesque pleasure**

The gremlins have been read as representing a number of different social groups, such as adolescents, hobos, Native Americans and African Americans (Rosenbaum, 1988: 37). In the context of this chapter the gremlins are read as naughty, monstrous children. Where real human children feature in the film they are portrayed as obedient, respectful of their elders and hard-working, i.e. 'ideal' children. Yet due to having jobs and higher levels of responsibility than their own parents, they seem more like adults – even more so than the film's 'true' adults. The film's more accurate representations of children are therefore Gizmo and the gremlins. This view is held by Pauline Kael, who describes Gizmo as 'the good child; the other mogwai are its aggressively vulgar, beer-guzzling brothers – children of the night' (1987: 188). The contrast between Gizmo and the other mogwai, who later become gremlins, invites multiple interpretations which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: they can be considered as representing differing stages of childhood, with Gizmo as a young child and the gremlins as rebellious teenagers; they can also be thought of as representing two polar views of childhood, as Kael suggests, with Gizmo as the innocent and Romantic view, and the gremlins as naughty, disrespectful, and violent; in a third reading, Gizmo is a sweet and naïve child who has been protected from the 'corruption' of horror films, and the gremlins are 'depraved', monstrous children that might be feared to result from consuming horror. Indeed, Kael echoes Wertham's concerns about the effects of horror on children when she refers to the gremlins as 'a gang of happy juvenile delinquents' (ibid.). This particular reading of the mogwai and gremlins as representing the before and after effects of horror on children is elaborated upon later in this discussion.

The reading of the mogwai and gremlins as children has been explored in some detail by Christina Mitchell Bentley, who notes that the film explicitly codes the gremlins as children through their playful manner and fascination with Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which they watch at a crucial point in the film (Bentley, 2002: 22-28). In addition, they are obsessed with junk food and gleefully defy authoritarian figures at every opportunity, including police officers. Gizmo, while very different to the gremlins, is also coded as a child, for example when cradled like a baby by Billy, who functions as a surrogate father. Bentley reads the dichotomy between Gizmo and the gremlins as Gizmo defeating the darker part of himself, drawing from Bettelheim's psychoanalytic reading that, in fairy tales, 'victory is not over others but only over oneself and over villainy (mainly one's own, which is projected as the hero's antagonist)' (1976: 127-28). As the evil gremlins spawn from Gizmo, Bentley reads the film as a continuation of Bettelheim's thesis that 'villain and hero are bound together as one', and that Gizmo must vanquish the evil side of himself in order to live happily (2002: 28-29). However, if we consider the film's conclusion it seems to present anything but a 'happy ending' for Gizmo, who is taken away by his original master. Despite having destroyed the gremlins, he is imprisoned inside of a box until Billy is 'ready' to be responsible. He is therefore not rewarded for his triumph, as are the protagonists in fairy tales or the child protagonists of the other films discussed in this thesis. To the contrary, Gizmo's fate can only be considered a punishment. This would align the film more closely with adult horror films in which monstrous children are treated as figures of evil.

Contra to Bentley's reading, the film is understood here as a satire that presents the gremlins' reckless behaviour as pleasurable to a model child audience in its gleeful destabilisation of the adult-dominated status quo. Rather than being evil and punishable creatures, therefore, the gremlins are child victims of an authoritative adult society that does not accept their monstrosity, despite its role in the cause of that monstrosity, and would rather destroy them than make any attempt to 'tame' or help them. In this way the film also

addresses a potentially very pertinent childish fear of being rejected and/or harmed by one's own parents, a theme which is explored in greater detail in Chapter Five. This interpretation of the gremlins as pleasurable can be related to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque (1968), which is characterised by 'excessiveness (particularly of the body and the bodily functions), by bad taste and offensiveness' (Fiske, 2011: 243). This is clearly applicable to the gremlins: one imitates a flasher by displaying his grotesque body, they greedily consume alcohol and junk food, dress in drag, attack a man dressed as Santa, reproduce in great numbers, and cause general mayhem in the peaceful town. These humorous antics are accompanied by their cackling, maniacal laughter. Bakhtin identifies laughter as an important part of the carnivalesque: 'it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding' (1968: 11-12). Like the carnivalesque, the gremlins' pleasure is 'in opposition to morality, discipline, and social control' (Fiske, 2011: 243), represented in the film by the humans and the cute, well-behaved Gizmo.

In the context of the gremlins' childish defiance and upending of adult authority and adult-defined social norms, it is useful to draw upon Wood's discussion of the themes of other contemporaneous New Hollywood blockbusters, particularly those of Spielberg and George Lucas (2003: 155). Wood identifies one of the major characteristics of these films as the 'Restoration of the Father' in all forms, from the patriarchal authority of the law to literal fathers, the heads of families (ibid.: 152). This comes at the expense of the subordination of groups such as women and ethnic minorities. He takes as a case study the final *Star Wars* film, *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 1983): the sole female in a prominent role, Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), is largely side-lined while her twin brother, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), completes his destiny. The film concludes with the redemption of Darth Vader (James Earl Jones/David Prowse), the literal father of Luke and the patriarchal villain of the series whose name is German for 'Dark Father' (Wood, 2003: 154). Wood concludes, 'the project of the *Star Wars* films and related works is to put everyone back in his/her place, reconstruct us as



dependent children, and reassure us that it will all come right in the end: trust Father' (ibid.: 155).

In a footnote to the above quotation, Wood dismissively refers to *Gremlins* as an example of the 'essential ugliness' and 'rotteness' that lurks beneath the surface-level 'sweetness' and 'patriarchal morality' of 1980s fantasy cinema (ibid: 155n1.). Although the marketing of the film and its association with Spielberg certainly seemed to imply that it was part of this trend, to read the film as a satire leads to a conclusion that *Gremlins* can in fact be read as *aligning* with Wood's disdain at the restoration of patriarchal authority in other films of this period. This is in line with the above suggestion that the gremlins, and the film itself, revel in the childish and carnivalesque 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order [...] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' (Bakhtin, 1968: 10). Due to the gremlins' inversion of the film's dominant patriarchal ideology, they are eradicated by the human characters who represent figures of the norm. In reading *Gremlins* as a horror film addressed to children, and the gremlins as figurative children, it is argued below that the violent eradication of the gremlins is actually unjustified, making them sympathetic victims of the film's true villains, the adult human characters. Here, the patriarchal norm and the human characters in *Gremlins* are also equated with the conservative view that children should be protected from violent media at all costs lest they turn into 'monsters', 'juvenile delinquents', or become emotionally traumatised.

It is necessary to perform some close narrative and character analysis to support this reading of the gremlins as victims, especially as they are typically considered to be the villains of the film.<sup>3</sup> By virtue of opposition, these analyses also reveal why the human characters

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<sup>3</sup> Should there be any doubt about the popular perception of the gremlins as the film's antagonists, an excellent illustration of this is provided by *The LEGO Batman Movie* (McKay, 2017). In the film, a range of iconic popular culture villains (who are represented in Lego form) are banished to a realm called the Phantom Zone. Lego versions of the gremlins are shown there, along with other famous

should be considered the antagonists of the film, and clarifies the repressive dominant ideology that the gremlins threaten to subvert. As mentioned above, the human children in the film are presented as obedient and hard-working to the point that they are barely children at all. The only 'real' children are Billy's pre-pubescent friend Pete (Corey Feldman), the unnamed grandson (John Louie) of the Chinese shopkeeper (Keye Luke) from whom Randall buys Gizmo, and some child extras seen briefly in the early scenes of the film. Despite being children, Pete and the Chinese boy both seem to have more responsibility than their elders. Pete is employed hand-delivering Christmas trees that are larger than he is. The Chinese boy holds more responsibility than his grandfather, as he leads Randall to the store, takes on the role of salesman, and has a concept of financial urgency: when his grandfather refuses to sell Gizmo, the boy reminds him that they need the money, before selling Gizmo to Randall behind his grandfather's back. The other human 'children' in the film, Billy and Kate, are presented even more ambiguously. Bentley observes that the film resists showing Billy until he has been established as a child (2002: 19). He is introduced via Randall's narration at the start of the film, which tells us that Randall is trying to 'buy a present for [his] kid.' It is therefore somewhat surprising to see that Billy seems to be a fully grown man. The characterisations of Billy and Kate cause further age ambiguity. Billy and Kate are never shown attending school, and instead they have jobs at the local bank. However, the status of responsible adulthood that this role implies is undermined for Billy when he arrives late, attaches a clip-on tie, hides his dog under his desk, and then sits behind the desk which displays an upside-down name plate. Despite this, Billy still seems very responsible when contrasted with his own father, and the fact that Billy is not a wholly responsible adult himself only amplifies Randall's lack of responsibility.

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antagonists such as Count Dracula, Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* franchise and the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Randall is an unsuccessful inventor whose products are nonsensical gadgets that provide some of the film's comedy; for example, a contraption that appears to be several fly swatters attached to an electric drill, and an artichoke connected to electric cables (akin to a potato battery). Randall claims to make 'the illogical logical', but this is shown to be untrue when his family attempts to use his gadgets at home. An orange-juicer explodes, covering the kitchen in orange sludge, and a coffee machine produces a thick brown paste rather than liquid. In this way, Randall's inventions transform the family home, which is supposed to be a place of comfort, into a place where its inhabitants are endangered by domestic objects that are intended to make life easier. Simultaneously, the failures of Randall's inventions, and his inability to sell them, also undermine his ability to fulfil a traditional role as provider for his family. As Randall is coded as an ineffectual patriarch it is left to Billy to carry the burden of responsibility and become the household's principle breadwinner, despite also being figured and treated as a child. This results in a tragicomic inequality highlighted by Kael, which is that Randall's offer of two-hundred dollars for Gizmo is flippant, irresponsible and unjust given that this money likely comes from Billy's own earnings (1987: 187). The world of the film is therefore one with a strange hierarchical order in which adults are dominant despite being more like children and children are prematurely pushed into the responsibility of adulthood. This is detrimental to the diegetic community, as evidenced by Billy being given Gizmo – a figurative baby – and the chaos that ensues when Billy fails to care for Gizmo appropriately. However, Billy cannot necessarily be blamed for his ineffectual parenting, as it is a result of the ineffectual care by his own parents that has pushed him into adulthood too soon. To echo Wood's question about *It's Alive*, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, what but 'monsters' could such a family ultimately produce? (2003: 89). It is therefore this heritage of unsuccessful parenting, and the misunderstanding of the creatures that result from it, that causes the havoc inflicted upon the town.

Billy's ineffectual parenting begins when he drops Gizmo, injuring him. Billy and Pete then break one of the rules by spilling water onto Gizmo and causing the other mogwai to spawn. Gizmo is clearly in severe pain during this process (Figure 3.5), but despite this, Billy takes one of the new mogwai to the high school science teacher (Glynn Turman) and forces it to also go through the painful multiplication process. One mogwai is then kept by the teacher for experimentation, which involves taking a blood sample that, again, causes the mogwai clear discomfort (Figure 3.6). In the following scenes, the mogwai at Billy's house (excluding Gizmo) and the mogwai at the school are mistakenly fed after midnight, causing them to be encased inside the cocoons from which they hatch as gremlins. From this point the gremlins begin to be killed, initiated by Billy finding the teacher unconscious at the school, having been attacked by the gremlin there. However, the method the gremlin chose was to stab the teacher with a hypodermic needle, possibly the very same needle with which its blood was taken. Therefore, the gremlin's attack can be understood as just revenge against the teacher for being kept in a cage and being put through unnecessary pain. After Billy finds the teacher's unconscious body, he presumes the gremlins to be dangerous and



Figure 3.5: Gizmo in pain during the multiplication process.



Figure 3.6: Another mogwai in clear discomfort as a blood sample is taken from it.



Figure 3.7: Lynn kills a defenceless gremlin.

calls his mother, Lynn (Frances Lee McCain), to warn her. This leads to the infamous kitchen scene.

The kitchen massacre begins with Lynn approaching a gremlin from behind as it innocently eats cookies. This is unsurprising, as it has just awoken from a twenty-four-hour hibernation and metamorphosis. When it climbs inside of a blender to eat the contents, Lynn turns the blender on, killing the creature while it is in a vulnerable position (Figure 3.7). Lynn is then attacked by another gremlin, presumably because it has just witnessed her kill the previous one. Lynn responds by stabbing it to death. This is witnessed by a third gremlin, which also retaliates. In response, Lynn sprays flea killer into its eyes (figuring the gremlin as a pest), forcing it to back into the open microwave in which Lynn traps it and cooks it until it explodes. Thus, a knock-on effect is started in which Lynn and Billy kill gremlins one-by-one thinking them to be dangerous, to which other gremlins respond out of what must be interpreted as self-defence and revenge for their fallen comrades. Finally Stripe, the last gremlin, escapes, presumably realising that fighting back individually is a futile endeavour and that there is safety in numbers, and heads to a swimming pool to multiply into an 'army' of gremlins. Close analysis therefore reveals the gremlins to be innocent victims. This aligns the film with Messenger-Davies definition of children's stories as concerning child-like characters 'at the mercy of bigger, older, and more powerful beings', and strongly indicates an address to children (2010: 137).

The address to children is also signalled by the mischief that the newly multiplied gremlins cause in Kingston Falls: cutting brake lines, taunting police officers, taking over a bar, and swinging from Christmas lights. Reynold Humphries reads the gremlins in these moments as 'the return of the repressed of infantile drives refusing any constraint' (2002: 134), and indeed, although some of their actions could have highly dangerous results, there is pleasure to be had in their recklessness. It again recalls the carnivalesque liberation from

the established order and suspension of prohibitions (Bakhtin, 1968: 10). Although it is implied that the gremlins kill the elderly Mrs Deagle (Polly Holliday) by launching her from a window in her stair lift, she is constructed as a two-dimensional villain who poses a threat to the Peltzers and other families in the town. A wealthy and powerful property magnate, early in the film she cruelly denies a family an extension on their rent and she threatens to kill Billy's dog. That the gremlins dispatch her in a way that is violent, yet cartoonishly absurd and amusing, is therefore to the benefit of the other human characters in the film and functions as a moment of absurd pleasure for the (child) audience.

Most of the gremlins are eventually killed all at once inside of a cinema, where they have gathered to watch *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This is yet another scene that revels in the mischief that the gremlins cause: throwing popcorn, cackling maniacally and meddling with the projector. However, like Lynn's blending of the unsuspecting gremlin in the kitchen, this is also a moment at which the gremlins are at their most childlike and vulnerable and further demonstrates the cruel mistreatment of them by the human characters. The gremlins are momentarily distracted from causing havoc as they all stop to sing 'Heigh-Ho' along with the dwarfs in *Snow White*. Entranced, having fun, and not inflicting harm on anyone else, they are as childlike as can be, right down to their choice of film. However, Billy and Kate take advantage of the gremlins' childlike, innocent vulnerability to set the cinema on fire. The only gremlin to survive is Stripe, who once again seeks a large body of water – this time an ornamental fountain in a department store – to reproduce. This can be construed as an attempt for him to save his own species as well as to gain reinforcements and enact revenge on Billy and Kate (and, to a lesser extent, Gizmo) due to their roles as gremlin exterminators. Both of these aims can be considered understandable and worthwhile efforts in the context of the close readings performed above that demonstrate that the gremlins are misunderstood, figurative children unfairly persecuted by reactionary adults.

Gizmo's significance in this reading must also be addressed. Although he is coded as the binary opposite of the gremlins – cute, fluffy, obedient and restrained – this does not make him the villain to their victims. In fact, similarly to the human child characters who are forced into adulthood too soon, Gizmo is another victim of the dominant ideology presented by the film. Through Gizmo, the film also presents a critique of denying children's access to horrific media. The three rules of proper mogwai care can be likened to parenting guidelines of what restrictions to place upon children's viewing. However, where a typical parent might relax these rules as their child grows older, allowing their child increasing freedom that is relative to their age and maturity, Gizmo is the ultimate example of a sheltered child, the rules governing him so strict that, until being given to Billy, his entire life was spent inside of a box. It is possible that Gizmo is unaware of what he is missing from the possibilities of 'normal' existence outside of the box, and is therefore presented as content with his existence. This explains his willingness to assist with defeating the gremlins. It is then due to Billy's careless parenting that Gizmo finds himself exposed to the consequences of breaking the rules that have governed him for so long, producing in him a shock so severe that it results in the vulgar monstrosity of the gremlins.

The sudden change from sweet mogwai to violent gremlin can be likened to societal paranoia that a once innocent child can become a monster overnight if exposed to horrific media. In this way, Gizmo and the gremlins can be likened to MPAA ratings. Gizmo shares elements with the G and PG ratings, i.e. generally suitable for all, but with the potential for danger. The gremlins share elements with the R rating, i.e. known for explicit material which is unsuitable for children. This accounts for all of the most commonly used MPAA ratings at the time of the film's release. However, as detailed above, *Gremlins* was partially responsible for the introduction of the PG-13 rating. The analogy can therefore be extended to interpret *Gremlins* as being prescient of the need of the PG-13 rating. Where the sheltering of Gizmo resulted in the monstrous gremlins at the first sign of breaking the 'rules', so might a child

be distressed and feared by adults to become 'monstrous' if exposed suddenly to R-rated material after having been fed a diet of only 'child-friendly' G/PG material. The PG-13 therefore provides an 'in-between' stage which allows children to be exposed to darker material in film gradually and in line with their age and maturity. With regards to Gizmo and the gremlins, this 'in-between' stage might be a creature/child that has been gradually weaned off the strict rules, thus preventing the monstrous version from appearing at the first sign of freedom. This might be something akin to the cheekier mogwai who spawn from Gizmo *before* they become the gremlins after further rule-breaking. Much like the PG-13 itself which is given to films that are not violent or adult enough for the R rating, but too violent or adult for the PG, they represent an 'in-between' stage of children, or pre-teens, who are not unruly, violent or disobedient, but are also not completely innocent, angelic and over-protected children. To borrow Spielberg's description of the PG-13, these mogwai are Gizmo with 'a little bit of hot sauce' and can be likened to children who have largely outgrown G/PG material and desire to watch horror films, but are too young to see R-rated films – i.e. the type of child who is catered by the PG-13.

As discussed above, Bentley argues that Gizmo must defeat the gremlins, who spawn from the darkness within himself, in order to not fear himself as a monster (2002: 28). However, this reading is not supported by the end of the film in which Gizmo is shut back in his box to be governed over by the strict rules yet again, punished for his victory rather than rewarded. Moreover, despite the defeat of the gremlins Gizmo still holds the ability to spawn further gremlins and begin the ordeal again. In fact, Gizmo has more in common with the gremlins than genetics. When the gremlins enjoy *Snow White*, Gizmo can be heard singing along with them. He is also shown numerous times throughout the film watching, and enjoying, television, including the science-fiction-horror film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. His televisual habits are then implied to have a positive outcome, as he is inspired by a racing sequence in the film *To Please a Lady* (Brown, 1950) to use a toy car to assist in defeating



Stripe. Gizmo watches these films in the presence of Billy, in what might be Billy's only act of appropriate parenting. While still a sweet and well-behaved child, these details imply that gradual, rather than sudden, exposure to media (both horrific and unhorrific) that is supervised by a guardian can be both beneficial and enjoyable. The positive effect of television viewing on Gizmo is sadly ignored by the shopkeeper who takes him back at the end of the film and berates the Peltzers for their carelessness and for allowing Gizmo to watch television.

### **Playtime's over: restoration of the social order**

It therefore seems by the film's end that the dominant ideology has won: the gremlins, as liberated children, have been defeated, and Gizmo and Billy will presumably return to their former existences as a sheltered child and a child forced to be an adult, respectively. Meanwhile, the adult characters seem to have learned nothing about how to handle misbehaving children who do not fit their ideal. The Bakhtinian carnival of liberation and subversion that the gremlins brought with them is over, and 'order' restored. If the film is considered to be addressed to children, and the gremlins the true heroes, this ending resulting in their destruction contradicts the notion discussed in Chapter One that children's horror films must end happily. However, it is necessary to return to Wood's statement regarding the restoration of the father in the context of the film's satirical tone and depiction of ineffectual patriarchal dominance in Randall. He does very little to help with the mogwai creatures, preferring instead to tinker with his inventions, before conveniently leaving for a conference when the mogwai become gremlins. He only returns just after Stripe, the final gremlin, has been eliminated, serendipitously implying that the return of the father re-establishes the dominant social order. Furthermore, he is given the voice of authority by narrating the opening and close of the film in such a way that implies that he is knowledgeable of the events in between, despite having been absent for a majority of it. This presentation is in stark contrast to his ridiculousness and ineffectuality as a businessman,

husband and father. Thus, when Wood claims that the dominant aim of 1980s Hollywood cinema is to 'reassure us that it will all come right in the end' as long as we 'trust Father' (2003: 155), *Gremlins* offers Randall to illustrate the perils of following this advice.

The film's final line, spoken via Randall's narration, can be interpreted as having a double meaning that is both regressive and subversive: 'You never can tell: there just might be a gremlin in your house.' To adult viewers representing the dominant social order that the gremlins intend to subvert, this can be interpreted as a warning that while the gremlins have been defeated, this may only be temporary and the battle must continue to suppress, control and/or destroy the monstrous child rather than attempt to understand it and, potentially, help it. However, to the presumed child viewer who might identify with the gremlins, enjoy their gleeful recklessness, and be sick of the rules that are enforced upon them by their own parents, it can be read as a sly wink and call to arms to embrace the monster within.

In spite of this subversive message that can be taken from the film, some peripheral materials created after the film was released continued to attempt to 'repress' the monstrous child. In November 1984, five months after the film's theatrical release, a public service announcement was commissioned from Warner Bros. by the US government as part of a drug abuse awareness initiative (Seidman, 1984). The one-minute broadcast (ACTION, 1984) shows Gizmo sitting on the lap of the shopkeeper character from the film, who explains the rules for the 'proper care and feeding of a teenager'. These recall the rules for caring for the mogwai from the film. The first two rules are to not let teenagers drink alcohol or let them get into a car with a driver who has been drinking. Each rule is illustrated by a clip from the film of the gremlins drinking and joyriding, respectively. The third rule, 'never, ever, under any circumstances allow them to take illegal drugs', is illustrated by the harrowing, but undoubtedly memorable shot from the climax of the film of Stripe's dissolving body after he

has been exposed to sunlight – an exaggeration of what might happen to a teenager who takes drugs. The shopkeeper concludes, ‘To grow up a happy, healthy teenager is important. If you love them, you take good care of them.’ Although this broadcast is clearly well-intended, the tone comes across as patronising and contradictory to the carnivalesque pleasures of the film. Despite it airing on MTV, presumably to get the attention of its teen demographic, it seems aimed at an audience of children and/or the parents of teenagers, rather than the teenagers themselves who are spoken about in the third person. Whether or not the public service announcement had any effect, positive or negative, is unclear, but it is possible that this was an attempt at damage control from the studio to atone for the shock that the film caused upon its release. If the gremlins in the film made behaving badly and defying authority look like fun, this public service announcement reinforces that their fun antics met a sticky end. This is highly reminiscent of didactic nineteenth-century children’s literature discussed in Chapter Two, allowing the public service announcement to be understood as seeking to re-establish the power hierarchy of adults over teenagers and children, and keep them and their ‘monstrosities’ under control. As is evident from *Gremlins*, however, keeping unruly children under control is much harder than it seems. Indeed, despite the controversial nature of *Gremlins*, its financial success<sup>4</sup> and role in the implementation of the PG-13 rating led to a number of other subversive children’s horror texts that encouraged anarchic behaviour in children being released in the latter half of the 1980s. One of these, *The Monster Squad*, is a case study of the following chapter.

The remainder of this chapter examines depictions of the monstrous child in children’s horror films of the twenty-first century. These analyses reveal that depictions of the monstrous child have become decidedly more progressive, sympathetic and celebratory with time. Although it is argued here that the reckless, carnivalesque behaviour of the

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<sup>4</sup> It was the fourth highest-grossing film in the US in 1984 (Box Office Mojo, 2016a).

gremlins can also be seen as celebratory to a certain extent, the texts discussed below are markedly different to *Gremlins* as they do not embed their celebration of monstrosity within a satirical narrative that, on a surface level, presents monstrous children as villainous figures to be annihilated. According to Wood, annihilation is the first of two ways in which monstrous 'others' of horror are 'dealt with'. The monstrous children in the texts discussed below are instead dealt with in the second way: rendered safe and assimilated (2003: 65-66).

### Normalising Childish Monstrosity in *ParaNorman*

While *Gremlins* presents a decidedly satirical and somewhat cynical view of the treatment of monstrous children, the stop-motion animated *ParaNorman*, released twenty-eight years after *Gremlins*, depicts a more sensitive, positive and progressive story of the treatment of children who do not fit within the adult-prescribed 'norm'. This goes even further to subvert the ways that monstrous children are usually presented in horror addressed to adults. *ParaNorman's* protagonist, Norman Babcock (Kodi Smit-McPhee), is a boy who can see and speak to the dead. While this causes his parents (Leslie Mann and Jeff Garlin) to be concerned for his wellbeing and for him to be labelled a 'freak' by his peers, Norman is not shown to be psychologically damaged or in need of help. Throughout the course of the film Norman learns that he can use his supernatural power to save his town, a Salem-like New England location named Blithe Hollow, from a three-hundred-year-old witch's curse and zombies who have risen from their graves. In so doing, Norman and his gift become accepted rather than viewed as 'monstrous' by his parents, peers and the town as a whole.

In addition to his uncanny power, there are a number of factors that mark Norman as being 'abnormal', principally his name and the title of the film. A pun on 'paranormal', the title marks Norman as being slightly removed from, or on the margins of, the 'norm'. Norman

also enjoys consuming horror by watching horror films on television and playing with horror-themed toys. This hobby, as detailed earlier in this chapter, can be feared to result in children becoming 'monstrous'. Norman's consumption of horror is met with some concern by his parents, though not as much as the concern they have for what they believe is his delusion that he can speak to ghosts, stemming from the death of his grandmother (Elaine Stritch) with whose ghost he converses regularly. It must be specified that although Norman is 'abnormal' it would not necessarily be accurate to refer to him as a 'monstrous' child in the same way as the gremlins. However, the fear and uncertainty with which he is treated by other characters in the film allows him to be read as 'on the spectrum' of monstrosity. His apparent lack of clear monstrosity also allows a parallel to be drawn between Norman and Gizmo in *Gremlins* in that neither character *looks* like a monster, but both contain the potential, or are feared to have the potential, to become 'monstrous'. However, where in *Gremlins* Gizmo's monstrous spawn are violently killed, and Gizmo shut away in a prison-like box, Norman's uncanny gift and love of horror both come to be embraced by other, predominantly adult, characters in the film. Moreover, the film shows that not being completely 'normal' and displaying aspects of 'monstrosity' is normal in its own right, and that these aspects can be to the benefit of 'monstrous' children and to society as a whole. As detailed in the following section, Norman's presentation contrast with the way that child characters with similar abilities tend to be treated in adult horror.

### **Norman's uncanny ancestors**

Norman's ability to converse with the dead likens him to the horror trope of uncanny, 'othered' children who have, or appear to have, supernatural powers. Often these children are presented ambiguously and unsettlingly: they might appear to be angelic, but 'the presence of something more sinister is suggested in a number of tiny details' (Sinyard, 1992: 64). Some prominent examples are the children in *The Innocents* and *Village of the Damned* (both the UK original [Rilla, 1960] and the US remake [Carpenter, 1995]). In each film the

unsettling children appear to be perfect: they are polite and largely well-behaved and, in the latter, impossibly and uniformly beautiful. However, their apparent perfection also makes the children frightening and unusual: they seem to possess knowledge and abilities that they could not possibly have, such as predicting the future or telepathy. In both cases the children also seem to have the minds of adults, contrasting disturbingly with their childlike appearances. Guillermo del Toro remarks that '[o]ur society seems to equate innocence with ignorance, and the fact that a child can be sophisticated is, by itself, a scary fact' and 'produces in all of a us a sense of inadequacy' (2013: 12). Children with supernatural powers or advanced knowledge therefore challenge the traditional power hierarchy of adults over children. It is especially unsettling if these children have knowledge of taboo subjects that adults would rather deny children are aware of, such as sex or death. While not physically monstrous, Norman and his predecessors in adult horror can therefore be considered monstrous according to Carroll's rubric in that they transgress and blur the distinctions between childish naiveté and adult maturity, and that they are capable of things that are not possible in known scientific thought (1990: 43).

Despite any similarities, Norman is not entirely like the children of *The Innocents* or *The Village of the Damned*. This is due to his presentation as a protagonist who uses his power to help others, rather than a mere victim or an antagonist who uses their power malevolently. This likens *ParaNorman* more closely to recent films with similar sympathetic treatments of supernatural children, discussed by Sage Leslie-McCarthy. She argues that 'since the late 1990s the portrayal of children in horror films has undergone a significant shift' (2012: 2). While acknowledging that the evil child trope is still sometimes used, she identifies a cycle of films including *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999) and *El orfanato/The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2007) in which supernatural children are communicators and forces for good. 'These children do not terrify, scare, or repulse the audience; rather they have the ability to reach, empathize with, and restore others, facilitating both personal and social

resolution and justice' (Leslie-McCarthy, 2012: 2). However, Leslie-McCarthy also points out that 'just like their frightening predecessors these children are still defined by their "otherness," by what they are not: not normal, not adult, not trustworthy' (ibid.). Furthermore, oftentimes these children are treated with a similar ambiguity as their evil predecessors, evoking suspense from the uncertainty of whether these children are innocent or evil.

Due to their child protagonists' ability to see and speak to ghosts, comparisons between *ParaNorman* and *The Sixth Sense* are invited, and are useful to this discussion. An important distinction between them is that the latter is a film addressed to an adult audience despite featuring a child character in a key role. Comparing the two films demonstrates firstly how *ParaNorman* shows how the supernatural child motif can be adapted to suit a film for children and, in relation to this, how it subverts the trend set by earlier films for adults by presenting a character who could otherwise be considered frightening and monstrous as unambiguously good.

The similarities between Norman and Cole (Haley Joel Osment) from *The Sixth Sense*, are numerous: aside from their ability to speak to the dead, they both find it easier to interact with the dead than with the living. A result of this is that their parents (or parent, in Cole's situation) are distanced from their child and do not fully understand or believe them. The central theme of both films is therefore the importance of communication: the ability of the child protagonist to communicate with restless beings of the undead and help them to move on into the afterlife, but also the need for communication between the child and their family. These two types of communication are linked in that 'the family may be complicit in making their own children feel alienated by a breakdown in family communication, driving them to identify and communicate with "others"' (ibid.: 11), but it is also the child's ability to speak to others/'others' that causes them to be alienated by their family. In the case of *The Sixth*

*Sense*, it is precisely Cole's success in hiding his ability from his increasingly puzzled and worried mother, Lynn (Toni Collette), that causes the rift between them. This rift is only healed when Cole confesses to her and relays information gained from the ghost of his deceased grandmother that he could not have obtained elsewhere. Conversely, Norman does *not* hide his ability and attempts to discuss it (albeit reluctantly) with his parents. It is this openness that disturbs his family until, similarly to Cole, Norman has undeniable proof of his talent when zombies invade the town and he uses his communication ability to resolve the conflict caused by their presence.

Despite any similarities, the treatment of Cole differs quite drastically to that of Norman due to the fact that *The Sixth Sense* is addressed to adults. Cole is not introduced until approximately ten minutes into the film, and even then this introduction is from the perspective of adult protagonist Malcolm (Bruce Willis), whose profession as a child psychologist implies that something is 'wrong' with Cole (Figure 3.8). It is a further ten minutes until we experience anything from Cole's perspective (his encounter with a bully) and half way into the film until his ability is revealed, presented as a shocking reveal. This communicates the message that Cole's narrative is not the chief concern of the film, which is underlined by the iconic 'twist' at the film's conclusion that Malcolm is himself a ghost. Norman is presented very differently in *ParaNorman*. Unlike Cole, who is overshadowed by an adult character, Norman is the film's sole protagonist. He and his power are introduced at the very beginning of the film, in which he is watching a B-horror film on television under the supervision of his grandmother's ghost. Following this interaction, in which the grandmother voices the key theme and resolution of the film, communication – 'I'm sure if they just bothered to sit down and talk it through it'd be a different story' – Norman moves into the kitchen where he has an uncomfortable interaction with his parents. *The Sixth Sense* also features an early scene set in a family kitchen, and it is useful to compare the two in



order to highlight the key differences between the two films and the way they deal with 'othered' children.

In *ParaNorman* the kitchen-set scene is filmed at the height of Norman's eye-line, placing the audience immediately in his sympathetic point-of-view. It also has the effect of the top of the frame cutting off the heads of his parents, indicating that they both literally and figuratively do not see eye-to-eye with Norman (Figure 3.9). This distance is reinforced when Norman meekly tells them that his grandmother's ghost requests that the thermostat be turned up. Norman becomes framed on either side by his parents while they argue about his wellbeing, but the shot remains at Norman's height, resulting in him being stuck between their midriffs as they literally talk over him and about him with complete disregard for his presence (Figure 3.10). Thus, the scene succeeds in making it clear that Norman is the protagonist with whom our sympathies lie and establishes the lack of understanding between him and people of the 'norm'.

The equivalent scene in *The Sixth Sense* takes place in the family kitchen of Cole and his mother; however, it is shot almost entirely from the point-of-view of the latter. In one continuous shot the camera follows Lynn as she prepares for work. This has the effect that the audience share her shock and unease when she enters the kitchen to find that, in the few seconds she was absent, all of the kitchen cupboards and drawers have been opened while Cole was supposedly seated at the kitchen table (Figure 3.11). The implication is that Cole has committed this seemingly impossible task, or knows how it occurred. It is later revealed that the disturbance was caused by a ghost, visible only to the petrified Cole. This ambiguous treatment of Cole continues throughout the film until he reveals his secret. The result is that the audience are left in suspense as to whether Cole is a malevolent child in the vein of those in *The Innocents* and *The Village of the Damned*.



Figure 3.8: Cole is introduced in *The Sixth Sense*.



Figure 3.9: Norman is introduced in *ParaNorman*.



Figure 3.10: The framing in *ParaNorman* evokes sympathy for the protagonist.



Figure 3.11: The camera work in *The Sixth Sense* distances the viewer from Cole and aligns them with his mother.

The differences between these two scenes are representative of the two films' overall treatments of their supernatural child characters, and illustrate some of the key formal and narrative differences between horror films constructed for child and adult audiences. Being addressed to a child audience, *ParaNorman* is aligned firmly with the point-of-view of its child protagonist and therefore treats him with sympathy, humour, and shows him to be unambiguously good. Cole is in a film addressed to an adult audience, and as such he is kept at a distance and used as figure of mystery and suspense in order to take advantage of the unease evoked by children in adults, as described by del Toro above. While Cole is in the end shown to be innocent and reconciles with his mother due to the power of communication, he and his evil predecessors represent possible ways that Norman could have been treated in another context: a child of mystery who must be feared and either tamed or defeated.

### Freaks and geeks: the ‘abnormal’ production context of Laika

The background of Laika, the studio that produced *ParaNorman*, is worth briefly exploring in order to contextualise the film’s progressive depiction of ‘abnormality’ within the Hollywood film industry. Although Laika have only released four feature films to date they have gained a reputation for inventive stop-motion animated children’s films with Gothic-horror themes and aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Stop-motion is highly suited to the horror genre, especially films like *ParaNorman* which concern the resurrection of the dead, as the medium literally brings inanimate ‘dead’ objects to life through movement at twenty-four frames-per-second. Throughout its history, stop-motion animation has been less frequently used to produce feature-length films than other forms of animation, i.e. hand-drawn cel animation throughout the twentieth century, and computer generated (CG) animation in the twenty-first. In comparison to both of these, particularly CG animation which is costly, technologically advanced and retains a ‘slick’ aesthetic, stop-motion has a ‘rougher’ home-made quality and can be seen as cumbersome in production terms due to the need to painstakingly move and photograph models frame-by-frame. As put by one Laika employee, ‘God knows, [...] there are easier ways to make movies’ (Dan Pascall in Robinson, 2016). Laika is also an independent studio based in Portland, Oregon, literally situating it outside of Hollywood. Interestingly, Portland is a city known for, and which embraces, eccentricity.<sup>6</sup> Due to their mode of production and location, Laika can be regarded as being outside, or at least on the very edges of, the ‘norm’ of Hollywood filmmaking. This appears to be a point of pride for the studio, as expressed by *ParaNorman*’s writer and co-director Chris Butler who describes Laika as ‘a bubbling crucible of every kind of abnormally talented dork, nerd,

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<sup>5</sup> Laika’s first film, *Coraline*, is also a children’s horror film and is discussed in Chapter Five. Their two most recent films, *The Boxtrolls* (Annable and Stacchi, 2014) and *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Knight, 2016) are departures from the horror genre, but still retain some Gothic-horror aesthetics and thematic elements, for example *The Boxtrolls* concerns themes of monstrosity.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Keep Portland Weird’ is a popular slogan used on merchandise such as bumper stickers and keyrings (see [www.keepportlandweird.com](http://www.keepportlandweird.com)) and this reputation is lovingly lampooned in the sketch comedy series *Portlandia* (IFC, 2011-).

freak, and geek you could ever have the good fortune to meet' (Alger, 2012: 8). This production narrative unsurprisingly bleeds into the narratives of their films.



Figure 3.12: From left to right: Mitch, Neil, Norman, Courtney and Alvin in *ParaNorman*.

Butler's description of Laika's employees could just as easily describe the characters in *ParaNorman*, particularly the children and teenagers who accompany Norman on his adventure. In both their characterisations and appearances they also deviate from the 'norm' (Figure 3.12). Norman's classmate Neil (Tucker Albrizzi) is bullied for a number of reasons that he lists with unexpected cheerfulness: 'Because I'm fat, and my allergies make my eyes leak, and I sweat when I walk too fast, and I have a lunch box with a kitten on it... Oh, and I have irritable bowel syndrome.' Even characters who seem on the surface to be stereotypically 'perfect' are shown to have 'abnormalities' of their own. For example, Neil's older brother Mitch (Casey Affleck) looks like a clichéd good-looking, athletic alpha male, to whom Courtney (Anna Kendrick), herself a stereotypically blonde and self-centred teenage girl, is extremely attracted. However, at the end of the film Mitch nonchalantly reveals that he has a boyfriend. This is notable as a rare example of an openly gay character in a film primarily addressed to children, and in other circumstances might have been treated as deviating from the patriarchal, heterosexual 'norm'. This is especially interesting given the film's status as a horror film, as Wood identifies those who deviate from 'ideological sexual norms' as a type of 'other' that is repressed within society and presented via monstrous metaphors in the horror genre in order to illicit fear and discomfort (2003: 63-65). That the

film makes no further comment on Mitch's sexuality, aside from Courtney's disappointment, is reflective of the narrative's sensitive treatment of those who do not align with what the dominant ideology deems 'normal'.

Thanks to the film's production design, even characters who do not appear to have any sort of clear 'abnormality' or 'monstrosity' are marked as such. According to co-director Sam Fell, the script described the film's setting and inhabitants as being 'tatty and rotten at [the] edges' (in Alger, 2012: 130), which can be seen in the deliberately imperfect and asymmetrical design of the film's sets, props, and characters. Mitch and Courtney seem on the surface to be perfect specimens of male and female teenagers: slim, athletic and attractive. However, closer inspection of their bodies reveals crudeness and over-exaggeration, such as Mitch's comically large chest. While over-exaggeration of features is common in animation, *ParaNorman* goes further, as exemplified by Norman: his irises have jagged edges, his eyes are different sizes, and one nostril is set slightly lower than the other. His most defining feature, his hair, tops this off in that it defies gravity, sticking straight up and refusing to be tamed. Rick Worland notes that 'monsters are frequently social outcasts because of their physical appearance, or the grotesque transformations their bodies may undergo' (2007: 138). Like the bodies of horror monsters, adolescents undergo their own 'monstrous' transformations during childhood and puberty: whether losing teeth (and growing new ones), discovering hair growing in new places, acne, or (for girls) menstruation. It is common for teen horror films to explore puberty through monstrous imagery; the werewolf, for example, is used as a metaphor for puberty and sexual exploration from a male perspective in *Teen Wolf* (Daniel, 1985) and a female one in *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett, 2000). *ParaNorman* follows in this vein by showing Norman encountering and attempting to come to terms with his 'monstrosity' – both the inherent monstrosity of his nature as a child and his monstrous ability – in various ways that are detailed below. In presenting Norman going

through this, the film can be read as addressing a child audience in order to provide them with a similar experience of catharsis.

### **Horror and monstrosity as catharsis**

Jeffrey Sconce has written on the appeal of zombies to adults, including the use of the zombie in everyday life, such as charity zombie walks called 'Run For Your Life': like the havoc inflicted by the gremlins upon Kingston Falls, such events 'present a carnivalesque reversal of power'. Healthy human beings adopt the zombie for both comedic and charitable purposes, literally confronting a symbol of death in order to defeat it and promote health (2013: 108-9). Sconce also attributes the appeal of zombies to wish-fulfilment: 'Zombies do not have jobs, mortgages, bank accounts [...] or any other discernible obligations' (ibid.: 106). However, scholarship such as this ignores the appeal of the zombie to children despite the extreme likelihood that children are just as fascinated by these lumbering corpses as adults. The prevalence of zombie-themed toy lines such as *Plants vs. Zombies* and *Once Upon a Zombie* attests to this. As suggested in Chapter One, the disgusting nature of *ParaNorman's* zombies gives them comedic potential that might be very appealing to child viewers. If part of the appeal of zombies to adults is their lack of responsibilities, so too might children be attracted to the freedom that zombies represent, as zombies do not have to go to school, do chores, or worry about bullies. Both this freedom and the monstrous nature of zombies might account for Norman's fascination with them. His engagement and identification with them may demystify the monstrosity of his own nature, and thus have a therapeutic function.

Early in the film Norman makes a scary face in his bathroom mirror. His mouth is covered in toothpaste foam in an imitation of a rabid creature, although the groaning noise he makes to accompany this indicates that he is imitating a zombie (Figure 3.13). That Norman does this in a mirror is significant; Jacques Lacan identified the mirror stage – the



Figure 3.13: Norman role-playing as a zombie.

point at which one can recognise oneself in a mirror – as a crucial moment in an infant’s development of their intelligence, identity and personality (1949: 1). While Norman is not an infant, this moment may be read as him enacting and (literally and figuratively) reflecting upon the way other people see him. Furthermore, by putting himself in the role of a monster, Norman can be read as exploring, confronting, and demystifying ‘taboo’ themes of death, gore, and monstrosity. Norman’s engagement with zombies is also indicated to help him work through the anxiety he feels due to his parents’ refusal to believe that he can see and speak to the dead. Following from the kitchen-set scene discussed above, Norman dejectedly goes to his bedroom, which is littered with zombie toys and décor. He then lies on his bed and plays with two zombie figurines in a mock imitation of his parents who can be heard continuing to argue. Echoing Bettelheim’s theory that fairy tales allow children to confront and overcome their anxieties, *ParaNorman* indicates that Norman’s use of toys associated with horror helps him deal with the anxiety caused by his parents’ arguing. In turn, this indicates an address to child viewers that their own consumption of horror will may allow them to overcome their own anxieties.

Another interesting scene in *ParaNorman* references the monstrous capabilities of the child’s body in a school toilet cubicle at a crucial point in the film’s narrative and in Norman’s character arc. Alice Mills observes that toilets are often utilised in children’s fiction

as spaces associated with negativity, which differs according to gender: toilets are where boys are bullied (usually via the trope of one's head being flushed in the toilet bowl) or where girls seek refuge from the ridicule of one's peers (2006: 1-2). Toilets are, of course, also associated with abject bodily fluids. That Norman is visited by the ghost of his uncle Mr Prenderghast (John Goodman) to be informed of his 'destiny' in a school toilet cubicle, which literally becomes a space of terror when Norman experiences the walls shaking and water erupting from the toilet, is therefore interesting. Before his death, Mr Prenderghast could also converse with the dead. In ghost form, he tells Norman that he must inherit his uncle's responsibility of keeping the witch's spirit asleep on the anniversary of her death each year, lest she rise and terrorise the town. The choice of location draws a link between the revulsion towards the abject symbolism of the toilet, Norman's reluctance to accept his quest, and the figurative child's journey through puberty and into adolescence. In an extension of his making a zombie face in his mirror, he must therefore confront and accept what is abject – both the monstrosity of the real zombies and of his own power – in order to become accepted by others, and to fully accept his own nature.

The 'monstrosity' of other significant child characters in the film should also be attended to, particularly with regards to how their representation compares with Norman and contributes to the film's key themes of acceptance of 'others' and the use of communication to prevent and/or overcome monstrosity. One of these characters is the bully Alvin (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), who is the only child in the film who actually appears to be physically 'monstrous'. Alvin is shown to be unintelligent, a delinquent, and somewhat Neanderthal-ish as he cannot spell his own name, has skills in lock-picking, and picks his nose in addition to tormenting Norman. His large, ape-like body looms over Norman in intimidation, but it is also used to comic effect when he is shown trying to impress some girls by dancing to a hip-hop song. Alvin is further ridiculed and undermined when he follows Norman to the zombies' graves and into Mr Prenderghast's house; he is far more terrified



than Norman, revealing his fear by emitting a high pitched scream and flapping his hands as he runs, and must be guided and helped by Norman in order to escape. However, as with Norman, Alvin is offered an opportunity to use his 'monstrous' qualities to do some good when the other children turn to him for his lock-picking skills.

The cowardice Alvin displays in front of the zombies contrasts with Norman's more collected response, which is interesting in relation to each of their levels of interaction with horrific media. Specifically, the film indirectly refutes the concerns of Wertham that consuming horror will turn children into delinquents. This is indicated in the following exchange between Norman and his parents, which occurs after Norman has been watching a horror film:

SANDRA: Whatcha watching in there?

NORMAN: [cheerfully] Sex and violence.

SANDRA: [visibly disappointed] Oh, that's nice.

PERRY: Can't you be like other kids your age and pitch a tent in the yard or have a healthy interest in carpentry?

NORMAN: I thought you said kids my age were too busy shoplifting and joyriding?

As Norman astutely points out, there are far worse things that Norman could be doing than watching a horror film, and this message is in turn conveyed to the child audience. Contrary to Wertham's fears regarding horror comic books, *ParaNorman* seems to suggest that *not* having a healthy amount of experience with the horror genre will cause delinquency. In addition, Norman's viewing is supervised by his grandmother, with whom he converses about the film as he watches. The film's reflexive presentation of and commentary upon Norman's film viewing therefore normalises children's consumption of horror and suggests that parents and guardians can act as positive and encouraging mediators of children's viewing experiences.

Never is it confirmed whether or not Alvin – or any of the children in the film apart from Norman, for that matter – is also a horror aficionado, but references are made to the types of media that Alvin *does* consume. When Norman and his accomplices go to the town hall to find more information on how to stop the witch, Alvin indignantly comments that during a zombie apocalypse he would rather be locked in the ‘adult video store just across the street’. Neil is vastly unlike Alvin in most ways, but shares Alvin’s fear of the zombies and his taste for sexualised audio-visual content that is designed for adult consumption. At an earlier point in the film Neil is shown watching his mother’s aerobics DVD and pausing it at opportune moments in order to stare at the female aerobics instructor’s behind. Never in the film are any of the (living) child characters, including Norman, shown or implied to enjoy ‘age-appropriate’ children’s content; yet, that Norman watches horror films under the supervision of his grandmother and plays with children’s zombie toys can be read as being far preferable to the activities and texts that the other children partake in and consume.

To return to the unusual body shapes and proclivities of the adolescent characters in the film, from social outcasts to bullies and stereotypically ‘popular’ kids, *ParaNorman* shows its presumed child audience that being different is actually very normal: whether that difference is having a strange ability (Norman’s sight, Alvin’s lock-picking talent), being gay (Mitch), having irritable bowel syndrome (Neil), having a taste for horror (Norman again), or having an unusually shaped body, as is the case with every character. Further, any ‘monstrosity’ displayed by the child characters is offset by the actual monstrosity of the zombies who rise from their graves in conjunction with the ghost of the witch being woken. They are the resurrected town council that condemned the witch to death three-hundred years before and were subsequently cursed by her. They are at first presented as disgusting and terrifying: with sagging, grey skin, yellow teeth, and the recognisable lumbering gait and groans of traditional zombies. However, as the film progresses they are rendered pathetic and terrified by twenty-first century life, from the skimpy clothing and raucous behaviour of

the townspeople to the commodification of witch-lore to promote the town as a tourist attraction. The zombies then become persecuted by the modern adults, who form a mob and chase them with pitchforks and flaming torches. Norman discovers that the 'witch' the zombies condemned was in fact only a little girl of Norman's age, Aggie (Jodelle Ferland). Aggie also possessed the power to speak to the dead, which was mistaken by her Puritan community for witchcraft, and was executed for it. In the film's denouement it is implied that the zombies' decrepit outer appearances reflect their past sins for which they spend the film attempting to atone: they chase Norman so they can admit their mistake and persuade him to right their wrongdoing. This is a stark contrast to the behaviour of the humans in *Gremlins*, who deny responsibility for the monstrous creatures that have been produced as a result of improper parenting, and destroy them. When Norman is successful in calming Aggie's spirit and sending her into the afterlife the zombies shed their skins, revealing their ghostly spirits which then also fade away. With the revelation that the witch was an innocent child, the comical treatment of the zombies and the mob mentality of the 'normal' townspeople, the film shows that there are far worse types of monstrosity than physical abnormalities, Norman's relatively harmless gift, or monsters from the grave. The film comically highlights this when Alvin screams at the prospect of being chased by zombies, but screams even louder when he realises that he is being chased by 'just grown-ups'.

Of course, *ParaNorman* is as much a ghost story as it is a zombie film. A reading of it as the former is illuminating and leads this discussion to consider another 'monstrous' child who is positioned in opposition to Norman: the ghost of Aggie. On the symbolism of the ghost in children's fiction, Judith Armstrong identifies a certain type of ghost that comes 'from the remote depths of a person's own mind', a convention which she explains 'is concerned with different aspects of the same person, the person he might have been, or might still become, had he not encountered the ghost of his potential self' (1978: 60). While not a ghost from within Norman's mind, the ghost of Aggie serves as a glimpse of the

'monster' that Norman might have become. In providing this contrast, the film also addresses the child audience in order to demonstrate how they should *not* attempt to deal with their own anxieties.

Aggie is at first implied by the film to be monstrous in the sense that she is a 'wicked' witch. When Aggie's spirit rises she does not use her real appearance, which is revealed later, but that of a crooked-nosed stereotype of a witch that the characters have built up over the course of the film. In being treated like a monstrous witch, Aggie has decided to behave like one. The truth, shown to Norman in a vision, is that that Aggie was not a witch, but just a little girl with the same paranormal ability as Norman. At the witch trial shown in the vision Aggie tried to defend herself by saying that she was 'only playing'; this draws a link between Aggie and the gremlins who, as argued above, are unjustly attacked and killed while engaging in innocent child-like activities such as eating cookies and watching *Snow White*. In the context of the puritanical, witch-burning society in which she lived Aggie is misunderstood as a witch or 'monster' not just because of her power, but also in simply being female. As Wood identifies women as 'others' in horror due to their deviance from the male 'norm', Aggie is triply coded as an 'other' due to her being female, a child, and in possession of a supernatural power. Even when it is revealed to the audience that Aggie was only an innocent child she retains the aura of the monstrous due to the horrific act of murder she was sentenced to by the council of judges. As a male child living in the twenty-first century Norman is clearly in much less danger of being treated in the same way as Aggie.

There are, however, further reasons as to why Norman does not come to be seen as 'monstrous'. As referred to above, Leslie-McCarthy identifies communication as a tool for healing families and communities in the post-1990s adult ghost films she examines. This is also referenced by Norman's grandmother as they watch a zombie film on television together. As suggested above, it is also due to the communication between Norman and his

grandmother as they watch horror together that potentially prevents Norman from being 'corrupted' or distressed by it. If anything, it is also likely that watching horror is, for Norman, a way for him to come to terms with his own 'horrific' second sight. In turn, this ability to communicate with others, living or dead, is the key to overcoming the monstrosity and 'otherness' of Aggie and the zombies. It is Norman's communication with Aggie that is the most interesting, and relates to the arguments throughout this discussion that the consumption of horror can be beneficial.

Above it is noted that no *living* children are ever seen consuming any 'age-appropriate' content. This is because a child who is not alive, Aggie's spirit, is fed the same book of fairy tales year after year in order to put her spirit to sleep until the next anniversary of her death. When the fourteen-year-old Wigransky criticised children being kept in 'utter and complete ignorance of anything and everything except the innocuous and sterile world' that Wertham would have them subjected to, he could easily have been referring to Aggie being fed a simple fairy tale with a happy ending which has repressed her trauma, rather than acknowledged it and allowed her to come to terms with it (1948: 20).<sup>7</sup> Norman, a horror fan like Wigransky, understands this, and thus confronts Aggie's spirit in the film's climax to tell her the story of her death. However, he also tells Aggie the harsh truth that, in her anger towards those who killed her, she has herself become a bully and forgotten who she really is. Aggie initially reacts with anger and violence, refusing to listen, but Norman presses on, and when he finishes the story he urges her to remember someone who loved and cared for her: her mother. This triggers Aggie to remember who she really is – or was – and the love and positive memories she has of her mother. Before Aggie's spirit contentedly passes on to

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<sup>7</sup> That the fairy tales are only a temporary solution – a 'bedtime story', as Norman calls them – indirectly refutes Bettelheim's argument fairy tales can help children to work through and overcome their fears and anxieties. However, rather than proving Bettelheim wrong, we can recall Coats' suggestion that twentieth and twenty-first century culture has 'degraded these once psychologically useful tales' (2008: 79). We might presume that Aggie being read the same tale over and over has had a similar effect of stripping the tale of its 'unconscious punch' (*ibid.*).

the afterlife – ‘healed’ by the therapeutic nature of Norman’s ‘story’ – she asks Norman whether he ever wants to make people suffer for bullying him. Norman responds, ‘Well, yeah, but... what good would that do?’ Norman’s consumption of horror through audio-visual media and toys has, in addition to the benefits outlined above, provided an outlet for him to enact the violence that he might otherwise have directed toward his family, Alvin, and everyone else who disbelieved or ridiculed him. In turn, this directs the child audience of address in the appropriate ways to respond to their own hardships.

In its resolution, the film therefore shows that possessing qualities that might be seen by some as ‘monstrous’ or ‘abnormal’, especially in children, is in fact normal in its own right and can be beneficial to the wider community. In this way the film strongly contrasts with the typical presentation of monstrous children in adult horror films, as well as with the treatment of the gremlins by that film’s adult human characters. Exemplifying this difference to adult horror films and to *Gremlins* is when Norman’s mother tells him that she and his father are not scared *of* Norman because of his claims that he can see and speak to ghosts, but scared *for* him and his wellbeing. By the end of the film, when Norman has proven that his gift is real and used it to resolve the narrative conflict, his parents of course do not need to be scared *for* Norman either.

In depicting Norman as a child who enjoys consuming horror through fictional media, and is not adversely affected by it, the film also presents the consumption of horror as an ordinary, worthwhile, beneficial, and perfectly acceptable pastime for children – including the children in the audience. This acceptance – both of children’s consumption of horrific media, and of Norman’s gift – is demonstrated at the end of the film, which mirrors its opening. Where before Norman watched television only with his grandmother’s ghost in a darkened living room (Figure 3.14), at the end of the film they are joined by the rest of the family, who acknowledge the ghost despite not being able to see her, with the soft, warm

ambient lighting of the scene indicating the shift in Norman's family's attitude toward him (Figure 3.15). That *ParaNorman* is itself a children's horror film that enjoyed modest financial and critical success, and avoided any major controversies similar to those caused by *Gremlins*,<sup>8</sup> also indicates that children's horror as a subgenre is viewed as far more acceptable and palatable to Hollywood audiences of the twenty-first century.



Figure 3.14: Norman watching a horror film on television with his grandmother's ghost in the opening of *ParaNorman*.



Figure 3.15: Norman watching a horror film on television at the end of *ParaNorman*, this time with his whole family.

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<sup>8</sup> The only controversy that arose from the film was fairly minor. This stemmed from the film's inclusion of the openly gay character Mitch, rather than because it is a children's horror film (Medina, 2012).

### The Irreconcilability of the Cinematic Child-Vampire

This final section examines the very few US children's horror films which contain representations of child-vampires – *The Little Vampire*, *Hotel Transylvania* and *Hotel Transylvania 2* – and considers how depictions of child-vampires in children's horror differ from those in adult horror films. This reveals that child-vampires are treated with far more sympathy in children's horror than in adult horror films, indicating a greater acceptance of the monstrous child in the former than in the latter. However, the analysis also shows that this acceptance is only possible through the significant lessening or modification of the monstrous qualities of child-vampires in order to make them less 'horrifying'. A link is drawn between this treatment of child-vampires and the 'watering down' or sanitisation of twenty-first children's horror films in comparison to earlier films of the subgenre, such as *Gremlins*. As a prelude to Chapter Four, this examination of child-vampires also raises the question of whether these depictions actually address adult fears of monstrous children more than the fears and desires of the child viewers who are supposedly these films' target audience.

This discussion begins by establishing how child-vampires are typically presented in Hollywood horror films addressed to adult and teenage audiences, and what these depictions imply about cultural constructions of children and childhood. These findings are then compared with the depictions of child-vampires in children's horror films.

#### **The child-vampire as figure of adult horror**

Of all monstrous children in horror films addressed to adults, the most monstrous and horrific of all is arguably the child-vampire. Perhaps indicative of this is that filmic representations of child-vampires are often memorable but surprisingly rare in US adult horror cinema, especially in comparison to other forms of monstrous children.<sup>9</sup> Of the few

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<sup>9</sup> The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) only contains fifteen feature films tagged with the key phrase 'child vampire' (IMDb, 2016a), compared with fifty-four results for feature films tagged with the key phrase 'ghost child' (IMDb, 2016b), forty-three tagged with 'zombie child' (IMDb, 2016c), and eighty-



representations of child-vampires in US adult horror, two of the most exemplary are Homer (Joshua Miller) in *Near Dark* (Bigelow, 1987) and Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) in *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994). It may be precisely due to the uncomfortable juxtaposition of the child and the vampire that their representations on film are so infrequent. The vampire cannot be completely divorced from either of its two defining qualities – violence and sexuality – which are also inexorably linked by the acts of biting and bloodsucking, which Jeffrey Weinstock describes as ‘part seduction and part rape’ (2012: 7).<sup>10</sup> The juxtaposition of the innately violent and sexual nature of the vampire with the Romantic notion of the child is therefore one of utter horror.

While it is argued in the introduction of this chapter that children are inherently monstrous because they are metamorphic, ever-changing and unruly beings, it is conversely because the child-vampire’s body is static that they are considered monstrous. As discussed by Lisa Cunningham in reference to Claudia in *Interview*, the child-vampire has a ‘culturally unacceptable body. The union of [their] age and “innocence” is incompatible with the required violence of vampirism’ (2015: 215). The fact that child-vampires often have static, eternally child-like minds is also cause for discomfort. Unlike adult vampires, who Alexis Finnerty argues are immoral, but are aware of this immorality and can show regret or restraint, the child-vampire is ‘amoral; their unintentional cruelty results from moral ignorance, rather than malicious intent’ (2014: 159). The dangerous combination of hunger, violence and a childish ignorance and lack of restraint is exemplified by Claudia, who is described by the narrator and protagonist of *Interview*, Louis (Brad Pitt), as being ‘capable of the ruthless pursuit of blood with all a child’s demanding’. Claudia also manipulates her doubly threatening outward façade of childhood innocence and girlish vulnerability to draw

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six tagged with ‘evil child’ (IMDb, 2016d). Though these results are not necessarily exhaustive, they are indicative of the lack of representations of child-vampires on film.

<sup>10</sup> The innately sexual nature of the vampire is explored in further detail in Chapter Four in relation to *The Monster Squad*.

in unassuming human adult victims. According to Nina Auerbach, this ability to be 'deceptively cute' makes children 'the most successful vampires of all' (1995: 191).

This deceptive innocence also applies to *Near Dark's* Homer, but unlike Claudia he is unsettling not because he combines violent bloodlust with a childish naiveté and moral ignorance, but because his mind has aged despite his static childish appearance; as he describes himself, he is 'a big man inside of a small body'. Homer shocks by swearing, referring to sex, smoking, gambling and killing humans with callous nonchalance, thus causing equal discomfort and humour due his unsettling juxtaposition of outward childish innocence with inward adult crassness and immorality. While the adult vampire 'troubles our construction of humanity' through its blurring of the monster and the human and the living and the dead, and other forms of monstrous children blur the distinction between adult and child, the child-vampire is triply unnerving because it blurs all three of these distinctions at once (Moore, 2016: 138).

It is possible that the concept of the child-vampire is so horrible for adult audiences to contemplate that it that remains almost unrepresentable on film. Even within the films which do contain these representations, the concept of the child-vampire is horrific even to adult vampires, and they are often killed before the narrative conclusion. Claudia is killed in *Interview* because adult vampires consider it forbidden to make a child-vampire; this is partially because her unrestrained bloodlust led her to kill another vampire, which is considered a crime in vampiric society, and partially because she is stuck in the body of a child, making her helpless and reliant on adult vampires to survive. Homer's death in *Near Dark* is a direct result of his desire to turn another child into a vampire to be his companion and, it is implied, his lover. In his desperation he pursues a human girl, and in so doing exposes himself to sunlight which causes him to combust into flames and die. In his death, therefore, two figures are 'saved' from the unconscionable fate of child-vampirism.

The fates of Claudia and Homer reveal another aspect of discomfort caused by child-vampires, which is that although they are monsters they are also tragic victims who have had their innocence and their ability to age into adults stolen from them. This paradox – that child-vampires are both ‘not children’ because they have lost their innocence, and yet not adults either – speaks to the schizophrenic conceptions of children and childhood outlined in the introduction of this chapter: children as both devils and angels, and childhood as a time of innocence that should be preserved, but also merely a preparatory developmental stage to be passed through or ‘endured’ on the way to adulthood. The context provided by the above discussion of the representations of child-vampires in adult horror is crucial to understanding the ways in which children’s horror films attempt to tread the line between taming the child-vampire without ‘de-fanging’ it completely.

### ***Twilight’s* ‘de-fanged’ vampires**

Before discussing children’s horror, the films of *The Twilight Saga* should be addressed due to their cultural impact, their status as teen films that situate them between adult and children’s cinema, and that the final two films in the series, *Breaking Dawn – Part 1* and *Part 2* (Condon, 2011 and 2012) concern child-vampirism. In *Part 1*, the consummation of the marriage of human teenager Bella (Kristen Stewart) and teen-vampire Edward (Robert Pattinson) on their honeymoon results in an unprecedented pregnancy. Tension reminiscent of *Rosemary’s Baby* is drawn out from the uncertainty regarding how monstrous the unborn half-human-half-vampire will be. *Part 2* concerns Edward and Bella trying to protect their child, Renesmee (Mackenzie Foy), from other, antagonistic vampires who believe the creation of child-vampires to be a sin. However, it is clear that Renesmee is not a bloodthirsty and violent child-vampire, but a benevolent hybrid whose only ‘monstrosities’ are that she ages at an abnormally rapid rate and possesses a power to project her thoughts, feelings and memories into the minds of others as images. In this way of transferring her goodness to adults – which is so effective that it convinces the antagonistic vampires that she is not a

threat and achieves peace between the warring factions – she can be considered the archetypal Romantic child, despite her quasi-vampiric status, who can redeem the adult (vampire) world.

Although Renesmee stands as an anomaly among the child-vampires discussed above, this needs to be considered in the context of *Twilight's* overall treatment of vampirism and its status as a teen series. Unlike the child-vampires in adult horror mentioned above, teen-vampires in teen films are often sympathetic protagonists who survive their films' narratives. Even in texts in which the teen-vampire characters are killed (e.g. *The Lost Boys*), vampirism is presented as an appealing alternative to the constraints, responsibilities and mundanity of ordinary mortal life. This has an obvious appeal to teenagers, a liminal group between childhood and adulthood who undergo anxieties such as puberty and negotiating one's identity and sexuality. Vampirism's carnivalesque upending of societal norms can also be seen as resonating with teenage restlessness and the desire to defy authority. Indeed, it may be precisely because teenagers are *expected* to be restless and rebellious that the teen-vampire appears to be more culturally acceptable than the child-vampire. Further, as teenagers (especially filmic teen characters who are often portrayed by adult actors) tend to look more like adults than they do children, the idea of them displaying the sexual and/or violent characteristics of vampirism may not elicit the same anxiety as when children show these tendencies.

*Twilight* is especially interesting in this regard as it significantly 'tames' or 'de-fangs' the vampire by reframing its relationship to its two defining characteristics: violence and sex. Edward and his family are moral 'vegetarian' vampires who drink the blood of animals and only kill other vampires in self-defence. Although Edward and Bella's relationship is sexually charged – particularly because of the entanglement of Edward's lust/love for Bella and his thirst for her blood, resulting in the danger that an innocent kiss could turn into a fatal bite

– it remains chaste until they are married in the penultimate film. Emblematic of *Twilight*'s 'de-fanged' depiction of vampires is that their skin sparkles, rather than burns, when exposed to sunlight. As the sparkle is, according to Mary Celeste Kearney, one of 'the primary signifier[s] of youthful femininity' (2015: 263) and the *Twilight* fan base is largely female, *Twilight*'s sparkly vampires have become representative of the series' feminisation and domestication of the vampire and why, for the series' detractors, *Twilight*'s vampires are insipid and inferior to 'traditional' vampires (Spooner, 2013: 146). The angelic depiction of Renesmee should therefore be taken in the context of *Twilight*'s highly moral, non-violent and sexually chaste treatment of vampirism, as well as its status as a female-focused teen franchise – a genre in which teen-vampirism is depicted as appealing and freeing, and teen-vampires as sympathetic and 'more likely to be regarded as a desirable romantic partner than a bloodthirsty killer' (ibid.). Crucially, as pointed out by Finnerty, Renesmee is also the result of a consensual, post-marriage sexual union between Bella and Edward, meaning she is 'born of love rather than violence' (2014: 167). Renesmee therefore 'did not have a prior life as a human to lose' and dispels the horror caused by other cinematic child-vampires who are transformed by an act of violence (ibid.). Renesmee is therefore not necessarily an accurate reflection of the degree to which representations of child-vampires have become more culturally acceptable in Western culture. However, *Twilight* remains important to the wider discussion of child-friendly depictions of vampires and the children's horror subgenre at large given its phenomenal commercial success which may have resulted in a 'trickle-down' effect to children's media. It is arguable that the *Hotel Transylvania* films in particular, which also contain benevolent, sympathetic vampires and a human-vampire relationship that produces a half-human-half-vampire child, have *Twilight* to thank for making these concepts seem acceptable in the mainstream, and thus also in the realm of children's culture.

### The child-vampire as figure of childish pleasure

Given that children's cinema is exclusively created by adults, it is logical that the hesitance to represent the child-vampire on screen in adult horror extends to children's horror. The only Hollywood children's horror films to depict child-vampires are *The Little Vampire*, *Hotel Transylvania* and *Hotel Transylvania 2*. Although the child-vampires in these films are treated with sympathy and are allowed to live 'happily ever after', unlike most of their predecessors in adult horror, they also go to great lengths to mitigate the 'horror' of the child-vampire in order to make this concept more palatable. In part this mitigation and the positive conclusions of these films can be considered a result of the need for children's horror films to end happily, as discussed in Chapter One, and it would most likely be considered unacceptable for a child character to die, vampire or not, in a film aimed at children. However, it can also be argued that these 'tamed' representations reveal that, at least to adult audiences and adult creators of children's media, the concept of the child-vampire is so horrific that even the most sympathetic treatments of child-vampires on film appear to push the limits of acceptability.

The lack of representation of child-vampires in children's horror films is somewhat surprising given the potential appeal of the vampire to children. King suggests that this appeal lies in 'the simple fact that vampires get to sleep all day and stay up all night' (1981: 370). This recalls the transgressive appeal of the carnivalesque and the appeal of the zombie as discussed above in relation to *Gremlins* and *ParaNorman*, respectively, as well as the appeal of vampirism to teenagers, as discussed above in relation to the teen-vampire. The appeal in the vampire's reversal of the norm can be seen in the children's television series *Mona the Vampire* (YTV, 1999-2003), in which the title character is a human girl who role-plays as a vampire and fantasises about being in an alternate reality where she battles monsters that threaten her town. For Mona, her vampire identity and imagined fantasy space enact a 'generational role reversal, with kids becoming responsible heroes and adults

usually remaining oblivious to any danger' (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: 28). Although Mona is not a real vampire, therefore not threatening or horrific like child-vampires in adult-oriented texts, the series highlights how vampirism can be considered a freeing and empowering alternative to mortal childhood which presents literally endless opportunities to break rules and defy adult authority.

Returning to the children's horror film, the childish appeal of vampirism is present throughout *The Little Vampire*, which concerns a boy, Tony (Jonathan Lipnicki), who is lonely and restless upon having moved to Scotland from California with his parents (Tommy Hinkley and Pamela Gidley). Tony is obsessed with vampires and draws pictures of them at school, which draws the attention of bullies, and dresses and role-plays as a vampire with fangs made from paper and tomato ketchup standing in for blood. When told by his nanny (Georgie Glen) to go to bed he recalls King's remark about the childish appeal of vampires when he retorts, 'Bed for the undead?' But as in *Mona the Vampire*, Tony's role-playing is only ever that – playing – and thus is safe and unthreatening. The casting of Lipnicki arguably contributes to this total lack of threat. Lipnicki came to brief fame in the mid-to-late 1990s due to his supporting role in *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe, 1996). At five years old, Lipnicki made an impression due to his cute looks and childish charm that, as put by one reviewer, 'softened granite hearts' (Stuart, 2000).

Even when Tony meets a real child-vampire, certain strategies are used to mitigate this concept in order to prevent it from becoming horrifying. Rudolph (Rollo Weeks) is a friendly child-vampire of a family of 'vegetarian' vampires who survive by drinking cows' blood. This detail alone significantly reduces the horror of child-vampire Rudolph as he does not pose a threat to humans. In addition, the drinking of cows' blood likens Rudolph and his family to mortal humans who eat beef and dairy products sourced from cows. Rudolph is also favourably compared to a pair of human brothers in the film, Nigel and Flint (Iain De

Caestecker and Scott Fletcher), who tease and bully Tony at school. Comedic irony is drawn from later scenes in which the brothers behave obediently and sweetly in front of Tony's parents and their own grandfather, the rich Lord McAshton (John Wood) who is one of the film's antagonists and whose ancestors were vampire killers. In so doing, the film clarifies that a child being a monster is not a prerequisite for being 'monstrous', and that being a literal monster such as a vampire is not necessarily the worst thing that a child can be. This recalls the positioning of Norman and Alvin in opposition to each other in *ParaNorman*. Like that relationship, which suggests that consuming horror does not turn children into 'delinquents', the positioning of Rudolph in opposition to Nigel and Flint can be read as a comment upon the effects of horror on children if child-vampirism, or a fascination with vampires, equates to children's consumption of horrific media. This link is invited by the text when Tony's father tells him that 'vampires belong in a movie somewhere, not in your room'. Rudolph and Tony are good and moral children in spite of being a vampire or having a fascination with vampires, respectively. Conversely, Nigel and Flint are naughty, immoral children despite not being vampires or bearing any interest in vampires. Tony gains confidence from Rudolph to stand up to Nigel and Flint. Later in the film Rudolph also uses his position as a vampire to frighten Nigel and Flint into never bullying Tony again. Interactions with vampirism – a stand-in for consumption of horror – is therefore indicated to have a positive effect on children.

Despite this, and the film's presentation of vampirism as appealing to children, the film goes to great lengths to further lessen the horror of the vampire. This occurs most significantly through the narrative's central concern, which is that Rudolph and his family 'want to become humans, not eat them for dinner'. They can achieve this by obtaining an amulet with which they must perform a ritual at the passing of a comet in front of the moon – an opportunity that comes once every five-hundred years. For as much as Tony considers vampirism to be appealing and as much as the film revels in some aspects of vampirism (like



thrilling flying sequences, one of which culminates with Tony and Rudolph bouncing on a blimp like a trampoline), *The Little Vampire* concludes that mortality as a human is superior to immortality as a vampire. This is expressed by the following exchange:

TONY: I want to be a vampire, too.

RUDOLPH: No, you don't know what that means.

TONY: Yeah, doing the most awesome stuff I've ever done in my life.

RUDOLPH: No. No blue skies, Tony. No flowers in the sunlight. Just this constant night.

TONY: Coooooooool.

Despite Tony's expression of awe at Rudolph's descriptions of the drawbacks of being a vampire, he comes to accept over the course of the film that it is not an ideal lifestyle choice. He assists Rudolph and his family in their search for the amulet, which turns out to have been hidden beneath the floorboards of Tony's bedroom centuries before. Tony is even the one to make the wish at the moment of the comet passing in front of the moon for them to become human.

Rudolph's yearning for 'blue skies' and 'flowers in the sunlight' is evocative of Romanticism, particularly the Romantic association between children and nature. Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote at length in *Emile: or, on Education* (1762) that children should learn from nature, as opposed to formal education, in order to preserve their natural innocence. This sentiment was shared by Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who felt that 'nature would implant [in children] the foundations of moral virtue and of beauty' (Cunningham, 1995: 68). However, contrary to Rudolph's expressed desire for a Romantic childhood – which is, of course, an adult construction – the Romantic desire to uphold the sanctity of childhood indicates an address to the interests of adults, not children. As discussed above, the hope of Romanticism was that if the natural qualities of childhood could be preserved into adulthood, then children 'might help redeem the adult world' (ibid.: 72). This offers an additional explanation for the 'horror' of the child-vampire. The child-vampire

stands in the way of this redemption of the adult world because even tame and moral child-vampires like Rudolph and his sister Anna (Anna Popplewell) are unable to grow up and carry their natural childish innocence into adulthood. In the concept of the child-vampire also perhaps lies the guilt of adults for not being able to protect children and prevent them from the ‘corruption’ of vampirism. This guilt is present in *The Little Vampire* in Rudolph’s father, Frederick (Richard E. Grant). Although he and his wife Freda (Alice Krige) clearly desire to be human as well, they appear to be driven by a particular urgency to ‘save’ their children when Frederick, referring to his search for the amulet, says ‘I will not fail you’ and addresses this specifically to Rudolph. As such, this indicates an address to adult concerns for children’s safety and well-being.

With Tony’s help, the vampires’ search for the amulet is successful and their wish to become human granted. After Tony makes his wish the vampires vanish, to his disappointment, as he thinks that the ritual has failed. However, the next day Tony spots a human family that looks uncannily like the vampires. At first Rudolph and Anna, now human children, do not recognise Tony, but after he whistles a tune at them (calling back to an earlier part of the film) their memories return and the children reunite. The appearances of Rudolph and Anna are a complete contrast to their appearances as vampires (Figures 3.16-3.17). In place of his spiked hair and pale skin, Rudolph’s hair is neatly combed and parted, and his dark-coloured, tattered aristocratic-style clothing replaced with a contemporary red shirt. Anna, similarly, wears a bright pink dress with flowers on it, and her hair is tied back in



Figure 3.16: Anna and Rudolph as vampires.



Figure 3.17: Anna and Rudolph as humans.

a neat plait instead of hanging loosely as before. Although they look entirely like ordinary human children, the drastic contrast with their former vampiric appearances means that their human appearances are best described as cherubic. Rudolph's desire for a Romantic childhood, or to be a Romantic child, therefore appears to have been granted. However, the rebellious, unruly appeal of the child-vampire, and thus the address to the desires of children, is not necessarily lost. In tandem with revelling in the appeal of vampirism, the film also acknowledges some of the appealing aspects of twenty-first-century Western childhood. When Rudolph takes refuge in Tony's room early in the film, he plays with and becomes fascinated with Tony's Nintendo games console. He also learns from Tony contemporary childish slang, like 'duh' and 'dude'. Therefore, while the child-vampires have been successfully restored and 'saved' from their monstrosity, it is indicated that their childhoods will not be completely without subversive and 'un-Romantic' pleasures.

The only other significant representations of child-vampirism in US children's horror films are in the two *Hotel Transylvania* films. Unlike *The Little Vampire* and its predecessors in adult horror, these films' treatments of child-vampirism are entirely positive and celebratory, and the child-vampires are neither restored nor killed. However, these films also go to great lengths to mitigate the horror of the child-vampire, further suggesting an address to adult fears of monstrous children. This mitigation is strongly tied to the fact that although these films can be classified as 'children's horror' due to their positioning as children's films through their marketing and their drawing upon horrific imagery, the *Hotel Transylvania* films are unarguably the least scary, least 'horrific' of all the texts discussed in this thesis. This indicates that although the idea of children's horror (and monstrous children) seems to have become increasingly mainstream and palatable in Hollywood cinema, this may be because of the subgenre's significant toning down of its horrific aspects in comparison to earlier films of the subgenre, such as *Gremlins*.

This discussion of the *Hotel Transylvania* films must be prefaced with the acknowledgement that they are set apart from the other texts discussed in this thesis due to having adult protagonists and because they do not follow a 'typical' horror plot structure as outlined in Chapter One. In the first film, monsters such as Dracula (Adam Sandler), Frankenstein's monster (Kevin James), a werewolf named Wayne (Steve Buscemi) and the Invisible Man (David Spade) are in fact benevolent beings who are unfairly persecuted by humans. Dracula's wife is killed by humans, and in response Dracula founds the titular hotel as a safe haven for monsters from human cruelty. 118 years later, in the present day, their haven is 'invaded' by a friendly human, Johnny (Andy Samberg). The remainder of the film concerns Dracula's anxiety that his teenaged daughter, Mavis (Selena Gomez), is falling in love with Johnny. As such, the film's structure is more akin to a relationship comedy or romantic comedy, like *Meet the Parents* (Roach, 2000), in which most of the characters just happen to be monsters. However, in suggesting that humans are the real monsters it humorously inverts Wood's proposed horror plot in which 'normality is invaded by the monster' (2003: 71).

These characteristics mark the *Hotel Transylvania* films as 'family films' rather than 'children's films' (a distinction that is made in the Introduction). However, given the lack of children's horror films containing child-vampires, these films are discussed here in order to provide further case studies with which to compare the portrayal of child-vampires in adult horror to their portrayal in children's/child-friendly horror. It can also be argued that although there are very few child characters in the films, the adult monsters can be considered as having a childish appeal due to their absurd appearances and slapstick behaviour. For example, Frankenstein's Monster, known as Frank, uses his ability to detach and rearrange his body parts to play tricks such as sending his bottom half, independent from his torso and head, to fart on another monster.

This comedic element of the *Hotel Transylvania* films is important to this discussion as it works to domesticate and tame not only the child-vampires in each film, but all of the monsters. This domestication arguably makes the celebration of their monstrosity more acceptable, and is the central concept of the films: as mentioned above, the first film inverts the traditional monster-human dynamic in that the monsters are more afraid of humans than humans are of them. As the first *Hotel Transylvania* film progresses it is revealed that in the 118 years since the murder of Dracula's wife, humans have come to appreciate and accept monsters. This is displayed in the film's dramatic climax in which Dracula must race to the airport, in true 'rom-com' fashion, to prevent Johnny from leaving Transylvania and, in so doing, breaking up with Mavis. As Dracula cannot come into contact with sunlight he has difficulty travelling to the airport. Coincidentally, the airport chase occurs on the same day as a human festival that celebrates monsters, which is made visually clear by banners with slogans like 'We ♥ Dracula'. When the humans discover that the real Dracula is among them they help him get to the airport without being burned. The second film takes the theme of acceptance further. Mavis and Johnny, now married, have an infant son named Dennis (Asher Blinkoff). The film chiefly concerns the ambiguity of whether Dennis is human or vampire, and Dracula's inability to accept that Dennis might be the former. It is also significant that both of the films are CG animated in a smooth and cartoonish style which contrasts with the tatty and rough aesthetic of *ParaNorman*. These elements lay an important backdrop for the celebration, but also the sanitisation, of child-vampires in each film.

In spite of the childish and humorous quality of *Hotel Transylvania's* adult characters there is a clear demarcation between child monsters and adult monsters. With regards to child-vampires, however, only one appears in the first *Hotel Transylvania* in a short montage at the beginning of the film. This is Mavis, Dracula's daughter. In this montage spanning Mavis' childhood from infant to toddler, Mavis is shown learning vampire skills such as flying,

turning into a bat and crawling on ceilings. The horror that might have been evoked by Mavis displaying these vampiric attributes is lessened predominantly through the animation style and design of the character. Despite her fangs, black clothing, hair and make-up, she is deliberately designed to be adorable, with overly large eyes and a round, cherubic face (Figure 3.18). The montage also communicates that Mavis is different from other filmic child-vampires in that she ages and matures, both mentally and physically, at a steady rate. This removes the anxiety that might arise from the static nature of most filmic child-vampires. Why Mavis is able to age is never made clear in the film. However, it can be speculated that the fact that Mavis' parents were both vampires in a consensual relationship means that she was, like *Twilight's* Renesmee, 'born of love rather than violence' (Finnerty, 2014: 167). Finally, like the 'vegetarian' vampires in *Twilight* and *The Little Vampire*, Mavis and Dracula do not drink human blood, but an unspecified blood substitute, therefore removing their threat to humans.

Even if horror were elicited by Mavis in this early montage, for the overwhelming majority of the film she is 118-years-old. This is indicated to be the vampire equivalent of a teenager on the cusp of adulthood. In fact, for her father, it is Mavis' maturity and budding sexuality (which is tied to the danger of her falling in love with a human) that is a far greater source of 'horror' than her actual monstrosity. Therefore, although the film might be considered somewhat progressive in its sympathetic representation of vampirism, and Dracula eventually comes to accept that his daughter is now an adult with romantic and



Figure 3.18: Mavis as a toddler in Hotel Transylvania.



Figure 3.19: Dennis and family in Hotel Transylvania 2.

sexual desires, the film somewhat perpetuates the horror genre's regressive elicitation of male fears of female sexuality, as criticised by Creed and discussed in Chapter Two. This issue is taken up in far greater detail in the next chapter.

In contrast to Mavis, her son Dennis remains in child (specifically, toddler) form for the entirety of the sequel. The child-vampire concept is so normalised that the film revolves around Dracula's various attempts to 'bring out his inner monster', as Dennis has thus far not displayed any vampire characteristics. It is only at the end of the film that it is revealed that Dennis is a vampire. The delayed emergence of Dennis' vampirism allows the film to 'have its cake and eat it', that is, to seem accepting of the idea of child-vampirism while largely avoiding showing it. Importantly, this avoidance is also facilitated by Dennis' appearance taking after his human father rather than his vampire mother, with a mass of curly red hair, freckles, protruding ears and large blue eyes (Figure 3.19). Like toddler Mavis in the first film, Dennis is presented as overwhelmingly cute which, combined with his human father's characteristics, lessens any anxiety that the ambiguity surrounding his vampire status might evoke. Despite the attempts of both *Hotel Transylvania* films to celebrate childish monstrosity, the strategies the films use to offset this monstrosity indicates that there remains something ultimately irreconcilable about the concept of the child-vampire regardless of whether they appear in horror films addressed to children or adults.

### Conclusion

Occurring in tandem with *Hotel Transylvania 2*'s primary narrative concern about whether or not Dennis is a vampire is an interesting debate about the drawbacks to the domestication and sanitisation of monstrosity, particular with regards to children's media. Dracula shows disgust and disappointment that Dennis likes to partake in human child activities, such as watching a television programme about a Cookie Monster-like character named Fluffy whose

defining characteristic is that he likes cake. Dracula's distaste is also expressed clearly during a visit to his old vampire camp, akin to a human summer camp, where child-vampires go to learn vampire skills and where Dracula hopes to awaken Dennis' vampirism. At this camp the child-vampires play badminton, sing traditional children's campfire songs and learn to fly by jumping from a short platform wearing a bungee cord and a helmet. This is in contrast to when Dracula went there as a child and sang monstrous variations on popular campfire songs, like 'Old McWerewolf Had an Axe', and learned to fly by jumping from an extremely tall, rickety and dangerous structure without any safety measures. This can clearly be read as a criticism of overbearing, overcautious parenting – however, the film is careful to point out that Dracula is not entirely in the right when he throws Dennis off of the aforementioned rickety structure, and must rescue him at the last second when it is clear that Dennis cannot fly. In the context of this chapter, Dracula's concerns can also be read as criticisms of the sanitisation of horror in children's texts. This interpretation is invited by a sequence later in the film.

It is revealed that Dracula's desire to awaken Dennis' inner-vampire stems partially from a fear of his own father, Vlad (Mel Brooks), who holds a prejudice against humans and is unaware that Mavis is married to, and has a human-vampire child with, a human. Dracula is therefore fearful that Vlad will reject, and possibly kill, Johnny and Dennis. Vlad, assuming that Dennis' vampiric aspects are simply slow to emerge, decides to speed up the process by '[scaring] the fangs out of' him. He does this at Dennis' birthday party, at which the aforementioned Fluffy character, who is a human man in a costume, has been invited to perform. Vlad possesses Fluffy in an elaborate set-piece that forces Fluffy to act in various horrific ways, including a reference to *The Exorcist's* iconic head-spinning sequence, and transform into a demonic-looking monster. This, of course, is a traumatic experience for Dennis and the other children at the party, but it does not cause his fangs to emerge. This



occurs later, when an antagonistic monster threatens Dennis' crush, a werewolf girl, and triggers the emergence of Dennis' vampirism so that he can rescue her.

A parallel can be drawn between *Hotel Transylvania 2* and *Gremlins* with regards to their commentaries on the effects of horror on children. Where I have argued above that Gizmo is a child who has been the subject of both overcautious and irresponsible parenting and whose sudden exposure to 'horror' resulted in the emergence of monstrous children, the gremlins, Dennis is also subject to overcautious parenting and fed sanitised horror. This causes him to become extremely traumatised at his first exposure to 'real' horror. Both films therefore demonstrate the dangers of children being exposed to 'adult' horror too soon, especially if their only prior experience with horror is heavily watered-down. Yet, that *Hotel Transylvania 2* takes this stance is intriguing given that, with its comedic tone, bright aesthetic and heavy mitigation of its monstrous aspects, it arguably contributes to the sanitisation, or to use Wood's term, extreme 'assimilation' of horror into contemporary children's media. Despite being commercially successful,<sup>11</sup> both *Hotel Transylvania* films have received mixed-to-negative critical reception. The negative reviews point to the films' 'saccharine' (Huddleston, 2012), 'infantile' (Rothkopf, 2015) and 'synthetic' treatment of horror that lacks 'bite' (O'Sullivan, 2012). *The Little Vampire* also received middling reviews, one of which calls the film a 'confection' (Stuart, 2000), and another concludes that 'children over 12 may indeed find it babyish, and those under 12 may find it not babyish enough' (Ebert, 2000). These reviews are very telling about the consensus toward children's horror films like *The Little Vampire* and *Hotel Transylvania*, and they echo Newman's derision that 'kiddie' horror films are unworthy because they are 'safe'. For these critics (who, we must remember, are adults judging content for which they are not the primary demographic), these child-vampire films are let down by their tepid approaches to horror and to the

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<sup>11</sup> *Hotel Transylvania* grossed \$148m at the US box office and *Hotel Transylvania 2* \$170m (Box Office Mojo, 2016b).

monstrous child, which they assume do not satisfy older child, teen and adult viewers but may nevertheless be too 'horrific' to satisfy younger child viewers. In relation to this, we can recall the criticisms of Bettelheim and Coats from Chapter Two that the sanitisation of fairy tales by contemporary media culture has stripped them of their therapeutic qualities (Bettelheim, 1976: 24; Coats, 2008: 79). Similarly, Fred Botting believes that the commodification of Gothic culture robs it of its potency, as 'horror cedes to familiarity. No longer exceptions, Gothic figures collude with the norms they once negatively defined' (2007: 199). However, if we read the 'safe' or commodified horror in *The Little Vampire* and the *Hotel Transylvania* films in this way, it may imply that their worth depends on the extent to which they are 'beneficial' to child viewers. Regardless of whether they lack a 'beneficial' or 'therapeutic' function as a result of their lack of 'true' horror, the immense commercial success of the *Hotel Transylvania* films indicates that they *are* valuable, or 'beneficial', because they provide children with pleasure for pleasure's sake – which might be the most subversive pleasure of all.

Though the above reviews criticise some children's horror films for not being horrific enough, the critical and audience reception of *Gremlins* indicates that children's horror films which veer too close to the 'horrific' can be just as problematic as the 'safe' ones, as they are feared to harm child viewers and/or turn them into the monstrous children represented on screen. Here lies the 'impossibility', of the children's horror film: they can neither be too monstrous nor horrific, and yet if they are not monstrous or horrific enough they are derided. Representing a middle ground is *ParaNorman*, which does not attempt to sanitise horror to the extent of the *Hotel Transylvania* films or *The Little Vampire*, nor does it contain anything quite as horrific or alarming as there is in *Gremlins*. Indeed, one review of *Hotel Transylvania* unfavourably compares the film to *ParaNorman*, which the reviewer believes 'showed just how to put together a funny, smart, kid-friendly monster movie without completely defanging its ghoulies' (Buckwalter, 2012). Yet, once again, this comes from an adult critic

judging children's content, assuming what children do and not find scary, and also assuming that all children, despite their varying ages and personal preferences, have the same tolerance for horror. Rather, adult critics and viewers might take a cue from *ParaNorman* themselves. In showing Norman happily watching horror with his grandmother, and that he does not experience adverse effects, the film indicates that children should be encouraged to choose what they watch and be given the freedom to explore their own tolerance for fear. The role of adults, meanwhile, is not to make value judgements but be receptive to and respectful of children's viewing choices and be present to diffuse any potential distress caused by them.

The issues debated in this chapter highlight the 'impossibility' of children's fiction criticism; that is, that when discussing children's media without the presence of actual children's views it is difficult to divorce these discussions from the adult perspective. In relation to this, this chapter's analyses of representations of monstrous children reveal that even though the texts under consideration are *children's* horror films, they appear to address inherently adult fears of monstrous children as much as, if not more than, the fears and desires of children themselves. Left largely uninterrogated here, these issues of address and adult fears concerning children are the focus of the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

### The Unkindness of Strangers: child endangerment and questions of address

Frank Furedi argues in *Culture of Fear Revisited* that, despite that fact that the contemporary Western world enjoys an unprecedented level of personal safety, it is characterised by an almost oppressive fear of a range of threats including terrorism, disease, environmental devastation, and danger from 'risky strangers' (2006: vii-xxii). Furedi identifies children as being the greatest victims of this 'institutionalization of caution':

concern for the security of children has led to a major reorganization of the childhood experience. Childhood activities such as roaming about with friends or walking to and from school are becoming increasingly rare experiences. There is now a well-established consensus that children should not be left on their own [and] are now subject to constant adult policing. (Ibid.: 121)

This is crucial context for this chapter, which focuses on three films produced in the midst of this attitudinal shift in late-twentieth century Western society at which concerns regarding children being endangered outside of the home were at an all-time high: *The Monster Squad* (Dekker, 1987), *The Witches* (Roeg, 1990) and *Hocus Pocus* (Ortega, 1993). These films feature child protagonists combating evil forces in the forms of monstrous, predatory adults. These evil adult figures can be labelled as Furedi's 'risky strangers' (2006: 133) and are read here as strongly resonating with contemporaneous late-twentieth century fears regarding child abduction, murder, and paedophilia. This chapter continues to utilise the primary method of close textual analysis employed throughout this thesis, but brings socio-historical context to the forefront of these analyses in order to more strongly illuminate the issues presented within this group of films.

Concerns about child molestation have been prevalent in the US throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but Philip Jenkins writes that this ‘surged during the 1980s’ (1998: 5), so much so that by 1984 it ‘constituted a revolutionary and perhaps irrevocable change in American culture’ (ibid.: 118-19). Some of the inescapable reminders of this ‘moral panic’ included televised public service broadcasts, the ubiquitous pictures of missing children on milk cartons, and dentists suggesting that children’s teeth be fitted with identification disks (Best, 1990: 22). Popular children’s characters, such as Winnie-the-Pooh in the made-for-television film *Too Smart For Strangers* (Messina and Underwood, 1985), were used as mouth-pieces to warn children to be wary of strangers, how to spot their tactics, and what to do if someone touched them inappropriately. Elsewhere in popular US culture, the theme of children kidnapped or endangered by strangers surfaced in films as diverse as *Labyrinth* (Henson, 1986), *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (Columbus, 1992), *Stephen King’s It* (ABC, 1990), *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992), and in the children’s horror films *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *The Watcher in the Woods*. Between 1976 and 1986 annual reports of child abuse and neglect had almost trebled, but many of these allegations were unfounded (Jenkins, 1998: 129). The rise in sentencing therefore does not necessarily reflect an increase in the number of crimes being committed, but was likely due to a greater awareness and understanding of sexual abuse (thanks perhaps in part to the above-mentioned public service announcements) having led to a rise in the number of cases being reported. Jenkins also suggests that the focus on ‘stranger danger’, i.e. children being endangered by unfamiliar adults outside of the home, was in conflict with the reality that the majority of molesters were neighbours or family acquaintances, if not members of a child’s own family (ibid.: 135). While the reality and the popular perception may have differed quite drastically, the fact that the American public predominantly believed that their children were in danger from predatory strangers – a belief promoted by the media – is a significant discursive context for this chapter.

Dovetailing with these increasing anxieties of stranger danger were concerns about children's safety on Halloween, specifically their endangerment from 'Halloween Sadism'. This was typically feared to involve Halloween sweets being poisoned or otherwise tampered with in order to bring children to harm. However, both Best (ibid.: 133) and Nicholas Rogers (2002: 90-91) stress that, like the concurrent fears of child abductors and molesters, Halloween Sadism was an over-exaggerated urban legend incited by a small handful of sensationalised incidents. Nevertheless, fears of Halloween Sadism are alluded to in two of this chapter's case studies, *Hocus Pocus* and *The Witches*. The former takes place on Halloween night, while both concern predatory, child-hating women attempting to lure children to them (in one case using poisoned chocolate) in order to harm them.

These films' foci on stranger danger and Halloween Sadism – or, things that can bring children to harm – indicate an address to adult concerns for child welfare. This is not to say that children do not fear threats from strange adults, but rather that, as stated by Lindsay Myers, '[f]ears about the welfare and safety of children have long dominated adult conceptions of childhood' (2012: 245). Children's horror films, which present adult-constructed conceptions of children and childhood, therefore perpetuate these adult fears for and about children. This argument recalls the work of Jacqueline Rose, which lends an alternate meaning to the 'impossibility' of the children's horror film. In her influential *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Rose argues that children's literature is 'impossible' due to the imbalance that arises from the fact that although it is ostensibly *for* children, it is in the overwhelming majority of cases constructed *by* adults, for whom it is never possible to adopt an entirely childish perspective and put aside the experience of adulthood (1984: 1-2). Due to this 'impossible' relationship between adult creator and child reader, Rose argues that children's literature is not about the needs or desires of real children. Rather, it constructs an adult fantasy of children and childhood as innocent and pure with the aim of shaping child readers to meet this ideal, thus ultimately

satisfying the needs and concerns of adults. In a practical sense, children's film is a form that is 'never for children alone' given that children, especially the very young, generally do not go to the cinema unsupervised and are often beholden to the purchasing choices of adult guardians (Donald and Seale, 2013: 98). Children's films therefore have an even greater incentive than children's literature to engage parental 'gatekeepers' of children's entertainment.

Catering to the adult audience can be seen in most children's horror films, but especially in this chapter's case studies. One way in which they do this is in containing references which seem to deliberately address the adult viewer and exclude the child, who is unlikely to understand such references. One scene in *Hocus Pocus*, for example, features an allusion to sex when the witch antagonists tell a male bus driver that they 'desire children'. They mean that they wish to find children to use in a magic spell, but the driver mistakes this as an invitation to have sex in order to become pregnant and responds, 'It may take me a couple of tries, but I don't think that'd be a problem'. *The Witches* can be read as containing allusions to Nazism as the antagonist, the Grand High Witch, screeches in her thick German accent that all children 'must be exterminated immediately!' She has also been read as parodying former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who resigned in the same year as film's release (Sinyard, 1991: 133; Bird, 1998: 126). We might also question the extent to which children are expected to recognise references made throughout *The Monster Squad* to iconic Universal monster films and its parody of slasher conventions through references to the fictional film-within-a-film *Groundhog Day Part XII*. In these moments there is likely a gap between child and adult audiences, solidifying Rose's thesis that children's fiction is 'impossible'.

This impossibility problematises the methodological approach of this thesis, which utilises Eco's concept of the model reader, or in this case model viewer. The sexual, political

and intertextual references listed above indicate that the model viewer of these texts is not strictly a child, but that a more complex mode of address is being employed. It is therefore useful to draw upon Barbara Wall's three modes of address in children's literature. The first is single address that only targets children throughout the entirety of a text without any consciousness that adults might read it. The second is double address, which overtly targets children but occasionally 'deliberately exploits the ignorance of the implied child reader and attempts to entertain an implied adult reader by making jokes which are funny primarily because children will not understand them'. Finally, there is dual address that allows a 'conjunction of interests' of adult and child readers (1991: 35). In relation to children's and family films, Noel Brown and Bruce Babington argue that single address is rare in cinema as children rarely go to the cinema alone, therefore the most common forms are double and dual address (2015: 8). The references in *Hocus Pocus*, *The Witches* and *The Monster Squad* listed above can be identified as double address, or figurative winking at the adult viewer over the shoulder of the supposedly ignorant child. But what of the other ways that these films seem to address an adult audience – ways that extend beyond mere references to themes and narratives that appear to draw upon adult fears and anxieties, specifically for child welfare? This chapter therefore seeks to examine the problem of address that Rose identifies in children's fiction specifically in relation to the horror genre, and the question of how these case studies engage with contemporaneous late-twentieth century anxieties about children's endangerment by 'risky strangers'.

Rose alludes to the issue of child safety when claims that '[i]f children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book' (1984: 2). In relation to this chapter, the films discussed below can be read as targeting predominantly adult fears of children being endangered by 'risky strangers', and that the narratives work to alleviate those fears by showing fictional children, as stand-ins for real children, prevailing in combating said strangers with courage, competence and



largely without adult assistance. As is explored in detail below, the protagonists of these films also go through processes of maturation and by the end of each film gain greater degrees of independence, responsibility, and the ability to take care of themselves and other children, especially those who are younger and more 'vulnerable' than they are. These narrative arcs thus operate within the societal context of 'billowing concern about the safety of unsupervised, latch-key kids' in the late-twentieth century (Rogers, 2002: 95). Rogers ascribes these concerns to the rise in single-parent families and families in which both parents, or the sole parent, work outside of the home – a claim that is corroborated by US census data on children's living arrangements in the 1980s (Kreider and Elliott, 2010: 7-8; Kreider and Ellis, 2011: 2). Although none of the child protagonists in the films discussed in this chapter belong to single-parent families, the threat of the destabilisation of the nuclear family and the absence of one or both parents looms within the texts.

Of particular relevance to this chapter is Rose's suggestion that the relationship between adults and children's fiction is driven by unacknowledged sexual desires on the part of the adult for the child; or, more precisely, the adult desire for the socially constructed idea of childhood within children's fiction as pure and innocent. This controversial argument arises from Rose's psychoanalytic reading of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911): 'Behind *Peter Pan* lies the desire of a man for a little boy (or boys)', Rose writes, referring to Barrie's biographical background in which he told the story of *Peter Pan* to the Llewellyn Davies boys (1984: 2). This relationship is mirrored in Barrie's adult novel *The Little White Bird* (1902) in which Peter Pan originated as a character in a series of tales that the first-person narrator, a bachelor, addresses to the child of another couple, David, within the novel. Rose reads the relationship between the narrator and David as 'anything but innocent. In fact it can be traced back to an unconsummated sexual desire' (1984: 23).<sup>1</sup> Rose describes the telling of

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, *The Little White Bird* contains details that can be interpreted as paedophilic: the narrator befriends David without the knowledge of the boy's parents, and at one point the narrator

the tales to David within *The Little White Bird* 'as an act of love' (ibid.) and relates this to the act of writing for children in general, which she refers to as a 'soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction' (ibid.: 2). To clarify, Rose does not argue that all children's fiction stems from adults' unconscious sexual desires for children, but rather that the unconscious motivation for the creation of children's fiction is in order to secure and stabilise adult sexuality: the painting of childhood and children's sexuality as innocent and pure within children's fiction 'hold[s] off any possible challenge to our own' (ibid.: 4). *Peter Pan* forms the ideal case study for Rose's thesis as the eponymous hero remains an eternal child. His innocence is never lost or violated, which is all the more important given the context of the 'crisis of child sexual abuse in the 1980s' in which Rose was writing, and which blurred the distinctions between adult and child, between 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexuality (1992: xvii).

The idea of childhood innocence securing adult sexuality is pursued further by Kincaid in his work on the social significance of the paedophile. He provocatively states that 'we invest a great deal of cultural capital in the importance of pedophilia' (1992: 3). According to Kincaid, the paedophile performs a role that is 'necessary to our psychic and cultural life' as a scapegoat who keeps the desires of other, 'normal' adults in check (ibid.: 5). Kincaid argues that these desires arise as a result of attributing children with 'the central features of desirability in our culture', i.e. purity and innocence (ibid.). Because these features are so desirable, Kincaid argues that 'figures who would enact this desire', i.e. paedophiles, are 'absolutely essential' (ibid.). However, we must then distance ourselves from this figure, placing ourselves in opposition to them. In this way, the paedophile is 'our most important citizen' so long as the figure, their crimes and desires remain at a distance, both literally and psychically (ibid.). Both Kincaid (ibid.: 285) and Rose (1984: 37) see Captain

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undresses David and shares a bed with him, in what that narrator describes as a 'tremendous adventure' (1902: 209). In part because of these aspects of *The Little White Bird*, Barrie is also speculated to have had paedophilic interests in the Llewellyn Davies boys, though there is no evidence of this (Picardie, 2016).

Hook as fulfilling the role of the paedophile scapegoat within *Peter Pan*. Kincaid's argument is obviously extremely problematic, even irresponsible, as it not only appears to justify the societal role of paedophilia but also suggests that adult sexual desire for children is inevitable. However, like Rose's work it was published parallel with the heightened societal unease stemming from fears of child abuse and paedophilia. Both of these works can therefore be understood as attempts to explain and come to terms with a significant cultural 'trauma' (Rose, 1992: xi). As discussed in Chapter Two, the horror genre theoretically allows viewers to overcome their fears and anxieties. It therefore provides the ideal forum in which to grapple with the fear that paedophilia and/or child abuse will affect our own children, and the fear that the desire and ability to commit those crimes resides deep within ourselves. Whether or not this desire actually exists is irrelevant, only that the *fear* of that desire exists, and needs to be abated. *The Monster Squad*, *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, as texts that occupy the same discursive space as these cultural fears explored by Rose and Kincaid, can therefore be read as depicting examples of the necessary cultural scapegoat of the child abuser that feeds upon and alleviates the fears, desires and needs of adult viewers, and allows them to distance themselves from that figure.

The portrayal of child abusers as fantasy monsters/witches in these case studies might form a part of this distancing strategy, a way of reinforcing the perception that child molesters are inhuman deviants suffering from a 'deep-rooted sickness or moral taint' (Jenkins, 1998: 188); or, 'not us'. Best draws out the similarities between conceptions of the child molester and fairy tale villains: 'The dark forest has been replaced by the shopping mall, the enchanted apple by the contaminated treat, the witch or wolf by the criminal or Satanist' (1990: 140). The similarities between fairy tales and children's horror is addressed in Chapter Two, and the films discussed in this chapter in particular owe a great debt to fairy tales. The use of food to lure and entrap children in *The Witches* echoes 'Hansel and Gretel', and a female child who wears a hooded red coat and becomes the target of a dangerous male

predator in *The Monster Squad* echoes 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The latter of these motifs is a significant point of interest in *The Monster Squad*, in which the girl in question becomes the target of various 'monstrous' predators. However, the discussion of this film is also strongly informed by its irreverent tone and production context soon after the implementation of the PG-13. Thus, this chapter questions whether *The Monster Squad* presents a straightforward treatment of adult anxieties of child abuse, or if it takes a subversive approach to the theme in an effort to satirise and undermine the extreme societal moral panic about stranger danger. The chapter then turns to the use of witches as particularly gendered representations of 'risky strangers' in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*. A key concern of this chapter is thus the representation of adult genders, sexualities and relationships in these films, and the extent to which they align with the presentations of these issues in contemporaneous US film and popular culture. This will not be at the expense of an examination of the representations of the child protagonists who are the victims of, and foils to, the antagonistic adult predators. Of equal concern, therefore, is how these children's encounters with the witches and monsters in these texts affect them, particularly with regards to their maturity.

### Anarchy in the USA: privileging the child and subverting 'stranger danger' in *The Monster Squad*

*The Monster Squad* was released in the US in 1987, by which time the safety of children outside of the home was a major concern in US public consciousness. The film takes its title from the name of the club formed by its central group of child protagonists: five boys ranging in age from eight to sixteen who are fans of anything to do with monsters and horror films. They meet frequently in their clubhouse, a treehouse in the garden of club leader Sean (Andre Gower). They are occasionally interrupted by Sean's little sister, Phoebe (Ashley Bank), who desperately wants to join the club but is rejected for being a girl. The Squad's

knowledge of monsters is then put to the test when their suburban town in contemporary 1980s America becomes invaded by Count Dracula (Duncan Regehr) and a host of other iconic monsters: the Wolfman (Jonathan Gries), the Mummy (Michael MacKay), the Gillman (Tom Woodruff Jr.) and Frankenstein's Monster (Tom Noonan).

These monsters rise once every century in an attempt to take over the world. They can only be stopped by obtaining an amulet made from concentrated good and the reading of an incantation from the diary of Van Helsing (Jack Gwillim), which will open a hole into limbo where the monsters will be trapped forever. The film's prologue shows Van Helsing trying and failing to complete this ritual one century earlier. As discussed in Chapter One, the ineffectuality or absence of adults and authoritative figures is a common characteristic of the children's horror film. Nowhere is the unreliability of adults and the abilities of children to make up for their failings made more apparent than in *The Monster Squad*, which begins by describing Van Helsing and his associates' attempt to 'save mankind from the forces of eternal evil' in an intertitle (Figure 4.1). This is humorously punctuated with a second intertitle that reads simply, 'They blew it', leaving this task to the Monster Squad one century later (Figure 4.2). This undermining of adult authority indicates an address to children; however, the sequence that follows is very adult in nature. Set in a classical Gothic castle in Transylvania, the sequence depicts the battle in which Van Helsing fails to defeat the monsters. The sequence is violent, gory and intense, featuring gunfire, rotting corpses, and one of Dracula's brides eating a dead animal, her hands and face covered in blood. It is only when the sequence ends and the film cuts to a typical middle school in suburban America that an address to children is re-established. Even then, the child characters use politically incorrect terms and swearwords like 'faggot', 'retarded' and 'asshole', refuting Rose's claim that children's fiction seeks to construct an idyllic portrayal of children as innocent. The five-year-old Phoebe even calls the other Squad members 'chicken shit' when they appear scared of Frankenstein's Monster, and she is later called a 'bitch' by Dracula. This ambiguity about

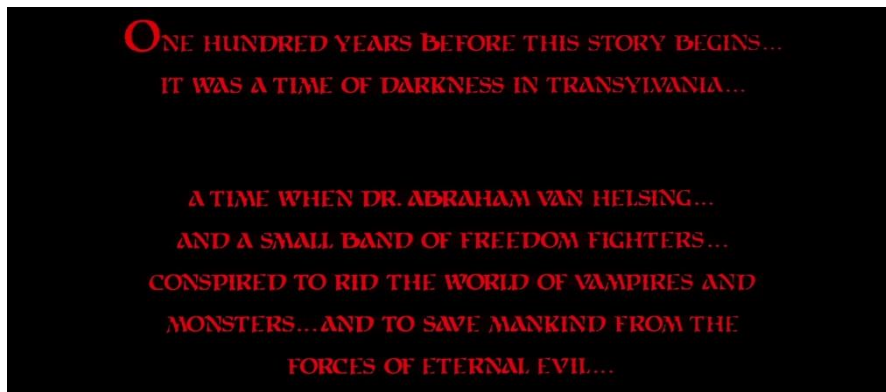


Figure 4.1: The opening intertitle of *The Monster Squad* begins with a serious tone.



Figure 4.2: The second intertitle quickly undermines the solemnity of the former and establishes the film's irreverent tone.



Figure 4.3: The theatrical poster for *The Monster Squad* (Nelson, 1987).

the film's target audience only persists throughout the film in ways that are detailed throughout the following discussion.

That the film's status as 'children's horror' is highly contentious links it with *Gremlins*, released three years earlier. Considering *The Monster Squad* as a post-*Gremlins* children's horror film goes some way to accounting for its ambiguous mode of address. As discussed in Chapter Three, *Gremlins* seems in many ways an adult horror film due to the level of violence it depicts and its relative lack of human child characters, but the film's status as children's horror is cemented by the way the film's marketing, merchandise and PG rating positioned it as a children's film. This disconnect between the film's promotion and its content resulted in the creation of the PG-13, which opened up a space for horror films that were not violent or scary enough to be given a higher rating and indicated an address to child audiences due to their child-centric narratives and themes. *The Monster Squad* is one of the PG-13-rated children's horror films that was produced in this post-*Gremlins* climate. In some ways *The Monster Squad* is more overtly a children's horror film than *Gremlins*, in that it is about the experiences of human children, rather than figurative children. However, examining the marketing of *The Monster Squad* confuses matters further.

*The Monster Squad* was a relatively low-budget co-production between HBO and two minor studios, TAFT Entertainment Pictures and Keith Barish Productions. As such it did not receive the huge marketing push that *Gremlins* did, as a high-profile Steven Spielberg production, nor was any merchandise released. For these reasons, this analysis of *The Monster Squad* paratexts focuses on the posters and trailer. The film's theatrical trailer and US poster (Figure 4.3) indicate the film's address to children by emphasising the centrality of the children within the film and their superiority over adults despite their youth. The trailer's narrator says of the Squad, 'They're young and inexperienced. They're a bit disorganised. But when strange things start happening in town, they're the only ones ready to do battle'



Figure 4.4: A second poster for *The Monster Squad* continues to cause confusion about the target audience of the film (Anon., 1987).

(‘Original Theatrical Trailer’, 2007). The poster also makes reference to 1984’s *Ghostbusters* and its tagline ‘Who ya gonna call?’, by posing the rhetorical question ‘You know who to call when you have ghosts. But who do you call when you have monsters?’, the answer to which is not a group of grown adults with advanced scientific knowledge, as in *Ghostbusters*, but the gang of children pictured on the poster, alluding to the film’s reversed hierarchy of children over adults. Although these marketing materials display a clear anti-authoritarian streak that indicates an address to children, another poster continues to muddy the waters. It imitates the style of wanted posters in which Dracula and the Mummy are figured as wanted criminals (Figure 4.4). The text features jokes and puns, for example that Dracula is wanted for assault and ‘bat-tery’. This humour may appeal to children, but one particular pun once again brings into question the target audience of the film: the listing of one of the Mummy’s crimes as ‘statutory wrap’. Not only does this seem likely to go over children’s heads, but it is entirely unsuitable for the promotion of a children’s film. It is difficult to see this reference to child rape as being unconnected to the film’s allusions to child abuse, discussed below, and the film’s production context in a society experiencing heightened anxiety about paedophilia. This is indicative of what Antunes identifies as the ‘ambiguity,



tension and the struggles of negotiating different, often opposing, perspectives and attitudes about both children and the horror genre' (2014: 26).

In addition to *Gremlins*, a major influence on *The Monster Squad* appears to be *The Goonies* (Donner, 1985). Though *The Goonies* is not a horror film, the similarities between the two films are numerous: they are both about a group of misfit pre-teen (mostly male) children who save their town when adults are unable to do so, and in the process defend themselves from a group of evil adults, thus enacting a carnivalesque reversal of power. In both films the children befriend a 'monstrous' adult who initially seems dangerous but is revealed to be gentle. The children freely use swear words, and there are references to sex and drugs that seem better placed in teen films of the era, like *Porky's* (Clark, 1981). Although these latter elements could be seen as coding the films as not-for-children, Ebert's review of *The Goonies* describes these as being precisely what children might find most attractive:

[*The Goonies*] walks a thin line between the cheerful and the gruesome, and the very scenes the adults might object to are the ones the kids will like the best [...] [Spielberg's] technique is to take his thirteen-and fourteen-year-olds and let them act a little older than their age. (Ebert, 1985)

This logic can be extended to *The Monster Squad*, meaning that it is precisely the elements that appear to code the film as adult horror – the swearing, sexual references and violence – that make it appealing to children. Presenting images of children who are allowed to enact transgressive behaviour addresses child viewers who may feel that they are enacting transgressive behaviour in turn by simply watching the film.<sup>2</sup> In this way the child audience are mirrored within the film, where child characters also transgress by consuming horror. For example, Sean exhibits this behaviour when he sits on the roof of his house to watch a drive-

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<sup>2</sup> The small but loyal following that the film has obtained over the years is testament to this appeal. Further transgressive pleasure may also be gleaned from child fans of the film forming their own 'Monster Squads' in imitation of the film, which one adult fan and critic admits to having done as a child. This included making his own Monster Squad business cards, in imitation of the characters in the film, which state 'we kill monsters for pleasure' and 'NO JOB TOO WEIRD!' (Lussier, 2012).

in slasher film through binoculars, and wears a t-shirt with the slogan 'Stephen King Rules' – Stephen King being an author of *adult* horror. The best way of summarising the film's appeal for child audiences might therefore be to say that *The Monster Squad* is exactly the type of film that the children in *The Monster Squad* would want to watch. The film's subversive, anarchic and carnivalesque qualities that allow children to behave as they please and undermine the authority of adults are important to the film's presentation of anxieties surrounding stranger danger, and to what extent the film can be read as privileging adult fears and desires over those of children.

### **'We're the Monster Squad': undermining adult authority**

The film's opening that undermines the authority of Van Helsing is mirrored by its ending in which the US army arrives to deal with the monsters. They are too late, the Monster Squad having already dispatched the monsters. When the army general (David Wendel) asks the children who they are, Sean hands over a hand-made business card and says with cool conviction, 'We're the Monster Squad'. He turns to high-five one of the other squad members and their triumph is punctuated by a rap song that plays over the end credits. These opening and closing scenes are ideal bookends to the film as the narrative between them is scattered with further evidence of the unreliability of adult authority figures. For example, the stereotypical childhood fear of there being a monster under the bed or in the cupboard is played upon to humorously highlight the ignorance of parents to their own children's endangerment. Eugene (Michael Faustino), the youngest member of the Squad, claims to his father (Robert Lesser) that a monster is in his bedroom cupboard. The father humours his son by opening the cupboard door and, without looking inside of it, exclaiming 'Ooh, look at that big scary monster!' Unbeknownst to him, but visible over his shoulder to the audience and to Eugene, there really is a monster (the Mummy) in the cupboard (Figure 4.5). The father then chides his son for reading too many monster magazines, which he assumes are cause of his son's anxiety, and leaves. This scene stands out among the rest of the film, and



Figure 4.5: Adult ignorance in *The Monster Squad*.

from *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, in that it takes place *inside* the home – in a young boy’s bedroom, no less – to suggest that the home is not necessarily a space safe from infiltration by strangers. While this scene arguably holds appeal for child viewers in exposing the ignorance of adults, it also taps into adult anxieties that they might not be able to adequately protect their children from monsters, whether literal or figurative. This can be identified as an example of Wall’s ‘dual address’ given the ‘conjunction of interests’ of child and adult audiences on display (1991: 35).

However, the undermining of adult authority persists throughout the film. This has the effect of empowering the child characters, thus indicating a stronger address to children than to adults. The total unreliability of adult figures of authority, including parents, police and scientists, is verbally acknowledged when the Squad befriends Frankenstein’s Monster. Patrick (Robby Kiger) says ‘We gotta get an adult’, but Sean refuses on the assumption that adults would lock up or dissect the Monster. Similarly, the unreliability of parents and the police are commented upon simultaneously through the presentation of Sean’s father, Del (Stephen Macht), who is a police detective.<sup>3</sup> Del’s occupation as a law enforcer and protector

<sup>3</sup> This is a motif shared with contemporaneous slashers that feature fathers who are also police officers and fail to adequately protect their teenaged daughters from serial killers: Sheriff Brackett (Charles Cyphers) in *Halloween* and Lieutenant Thompson (John Saxon) in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Ineffectual police officers also feature elsewhere in children’s horror, notably *Monster House*, discussed in the next chapter, and *Gremlins*. When Billy asks for the help of the police in *Gremlins*

of others becomes ironic when his commitment to the job distracts him from protecting his wife and children. He and his wife (Mary Ellen Trainor) have marital problems that are suggested to stem from Del putting his career above his marriage when he cancels an appointment with a marriage counsellor to go to work. If, as Rogers suggests, late-twentieth century concern for children's safety can be tied to the decline of the traditional nuclear family structure (2002: 95), then this anxiety is expressed in *The Monster Squad* through the implication that Sean's parents' marital problems draw their attention away from their children. Sean and Phoebe appear able to roam the town unsupervised, including at night, leaving them vulnerable to monstrous strangers. In one scene, the parents can be heard having an argument simultaneous to Sean, left to his own devices in the next room, investigating evidence relating to the monsters. Lack of parental supervision is obviously crucial to the narrative of *The Monster Squad* as well as most children's horror films, as otherwise the child characters would not have the freedom to explore their surroundings and defeat the monsters. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the sub-plot concerning Sean's parents' marriage, and the fact that this diverts their attention away from their children's activities, is very interesting in relation to the contemporaneous concerns regarding child endangerment and the extent to which the film addresses this predominantly adult concern.

Alongside the Monster Squad's quest to retrieve the amulet and cast the monsters into limbo, Del and his partner (Stan Shaw) attempt to deal with the chaos that is being caused by the monsters. However, Del's ability to do so is undermined when his attempts to kill the monsters are unsuccessful. He shoots Dracula to no avail and then tries to blow him up with a stick of dynamite, only for the Wolfman to interrupt by attacking Del. These failed uses of weapons of violence can be read as signalling a crisis of Del's masculinity and

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they do not believe his claims and can be seen playing with toy guns. When they do finally witness the havoc being caused by the gremlins, they flee in cowardice. A false police officer who is actually an ordinary man in a convincing Halloween costume also features in *Hocus Pocus*.

patriarchal authority. That his attempt to kill Dracula is foiled by a werewolf is significant in this regard, as lycanthropy is typically considered to symbolise excessive masculinity (du Coudray, 2006: 85). Further, weapons in visual culture are often read as phallic symbols of masculine power, for example the gun in the action film or the knife in the slasher. This line of thought can also be applied to the long, thin shape and explosive nature of the stick of dynamite. Del's failures to use these potent signifiers of masculinity therefore call into question his own masculinity as well as his protective abilities as a father, husband and law enforcer.

The film's emphasis on Del, who has a more active role in the film than most parents in children's horror, is one of the key ways in which the film appears to draw upon adult concerns, namely, the (in)ability of adults to protect children from other, more dangerous adults. However, the child characters seem perfectly able to protect themselves without Del's help, and Del's narrative of patriarchy in crisis is left curiously unresolved. He is not granted a triumphant act of redemption where he proves his abilities as a protector, as might be expected were he the protagonist of the film. As he is not the protagonist, his failures serve to empower the child characters, who prevail where he and other adult authority figures cannot. However, it is only the male child characters in their early and mid-teens, i.e. on the cusp or in the middle of puberty, who are granted these moments of triumph. This is interesting in light of Del's failed masculinity. After his failure to blow up Dracula and near-death by the Wolfman, Del is saved by Sean, who stuffs the dynamite into the Wolfman's trousers. This suggests a generational passing of the torch from Del to Sean, who takes up the position of protecting the family that Del can no longer occupy. Other Squad members triumph in similar ways that assert their masculine dominance. Horace (Brent Chalem), kills the Gillman with a shotgun, in the process saving two boys who had been bullying him earlier in the film and completing his narrative arc from weak victim to macho saviour. This point is made abundantly clear when the bullies say to Horace, 'Hey, fat kid. Good job!' Horace turns

to them, holding the shotgun, and replies, 'My name... is Horace!' This is punctuated by Horace triumphantly pumping the shotgun. Rudy (Ryan Lambert), the oldest member of the Squad, is granted the most striking moment of masculine dominance when he kills each of Dracula's brides by stabbing them in their hearts with wooden stakes – weapons that are also easily interpretable as phallic objects.

The inability of adults to protect children in *The Monster Squad* therefore serves the coming-of-age of the child characters by demonstrating their ability to take matters into their own hands, and indicates an address to a child audience who may derive pleasure from these moments. However, it also arguably also serves adult viewers by providing reassurance that children can be capable of taking care of themselves in the absence of adult supervision or upon the failure of adult protective measures. However, to say that the child characters are completely absent of adult supervision is not strictly correct. The following section attends to two important adult characters in *The Monster Squad* who can be read as 'risky strangers', and explores the extent to which the film's treatment of these characters clarifies to whom the film is primarily addressed.

### **Old friends: elderly and monstrous allies in children's horror**

The two important adults who have so far been neglected in this discussion are Frankenstein's Monster and an elderly man known only as Scary German Guy (Leonardo Cimino). These characters are distinct from other adults in the film due to monstrosity or age, respectively. Both of them also initially appear to be prototype 'risky strangers' before these expectations are subverted and both characters become allies to the Monster Squad. The role of Scary German Guy in particular opens up an interesting discussion on the role of the elderly in children's horror.

Early in *The Monster Squad*, Scary German Guy is referred to by the children in fearful but fascinated tones. They pass his house on the way to and from school but only ever see

fleeting glimpses of him when he peers at them through his curtains. This builds an image of him as a mysterious hermit who might have nefarious intentions toward them. The film encourages this view of Scary German Guy through the visual presentation of his home. In contrast to the neat, clean houses that the Squad members live in with their families, Scary German Guy's home is dilapidated in appearance with an overgrown garden and a chain-link fence that evokes imprisonment and danger. This situates him among a tradition of psychopathic serial killers in adult horror cinema who also live in run-down houses, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen). In addition, his nationality and strong German accent function to 'other' him and possibly associate him in the minds of the child characters with Nazism.

*The Monster Squad* builds this expectation of Scary German Guy as a villain for as long as possible before subverting this expectation and revealing him to be benevolent. The children, needing someone to translate Van Helsing's diary from German to English, decide to ask Scary German Guy for help despite their reservations. They hesitate in front of the house and Patrick jokingly asks, 'What's the German for "Please don't murder us"?' To their horror, Scary German Guy approaches them from behind and answers the question. To extract as much suspense as possible, the film then cuts to an equally tense scene involving Phoebe and Frankenstein's Monster, discussed below. When it cuts back to Scary German Guy's house, he is holding a knife – another motif associated with psycho killers – and warns, 'Your time is almost up...' However, as he brings the knife down the film cuts to reveal a pie on a table. He finishes, 'It's your last chance for pie', as he brings the knife down to cut it. The camera tracks back to show the children perfectly safe and happy, as confirmed when Horace exclaims, 'Scary German Guy is bitchin'!' Far from being a Nazi, Scary German Guy is also revealed to have been imprisoned in a concentration camp after the children comment, 'You sure know a lot about monsters'. He mournfully agrees and the film cuts to reveal a serial number tattooed on his wrist. For the remainder of the film Scary German Guy is an

integral ally of the children due to his translation skills, but his implied experience with human ‘monsters’ also appears to give him the motivation, experience, and knowledge of the capacity for evil to help the children that other adult characters might not have.

Scary German Guy is one of several elderly characters in children’s horror who believe in supernatural forces and assist the child protagonists, or are at least sympathetic to their cause. Luke’s grandmother (Mai Zetterling) in *The Witches* is another example. Like Scary German Guy, she is implied to have battled monsters – in this case, witches – in the past, and is the one to warn Luke about witches.<sup>4</sup> The elderly ally is an archetype in many coming-of-age, fantasy or adventure narratives stretching back as far as myth and folktale. They feature in Propp’s formalist analysis of folktales in the role of the ‘donor’, a person who provides assistance, usually magical, to the hero or heroine, like Cinderella’s fairy godmother (Propp, 1968: 79). The elderly ally also takes the form of the supernatural ‘mentor’ in Campbell’s monomyth (1949: 49). Merlin from Arthurian legend is a classical embodiment of this archetype, but it can also be seen in a diverse range of examples throughout contemporary popular culture.<sup>5</sup> However, these aged helpers possess an air of authority and power not shared by elderly characters in children’s horror films, who tend to be knowledgeable but otherwise powerless. The role of the elderly ally is particularly interesting in the context of children’s horror as they are also exceptions to the claim made throughout this thesis that adult characters are typically unreliable, ignorant or antagonistic. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of sympathetic elderly characters in children’s horror films include Norman’s grandmother’s ghost in *ParaNorman*, Mrs Aylwood (Bette Davis) in *The Watcher in the Woods*, *Monster House*’s Mr Nebbercracker and *The Hole*’s Creepy Carl. The latter two are discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these diverse examples include Obi Wan Kenobi and Yoda in *Star Wars*, a science-fiction franchise, Professor Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, a fantasy franchise, and Mr Miyagi (Pat Morita) in *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984), a martial arts teen film. The archetype can also be seen parodied in the animated film *The LEGO Movie* (Lord and Miller, 2014) in the form of the character Vitruvius (Morgan Freeman).



therefore worth exploring what makes the elderly effective allies, especially in children's horror films that concern stranger danger.

Despite their vast differences in age, children and the elderly are closely linked in other ways which explain their mutual reliance on each other in children's horror. Peirse notes in relation to children's horror television that children and the elderly are presented as 'two generations of people who stand apart from the everyday world where adults of working age make the important decisions' (2010: 118). This marginalisation allows both children and the elderly to be read as 'others' to the adult 'norm'. Interestingly, however, while Wood identifies children as an 'othered' group often used as a source of fear in adult horror films, he does not identify the elderly as such. Regardless, from *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1962) to *The Visit* (Shyamalan, 2015), the portrayal of the elderly or the ageing process as abject is common in adult horror. This is understandable as the elderly offer younger adults a projection of what they might face in their future: declining mental and physical health; a loss of control over bodily functions; a loss of mobility and independence; and the need to rely upon the care of others. Most of these qualities are applicable to children of varying ages, where rather than having lost these things they are yet to gain them. This suggests a symmetry and kinship between children and the elderly which in children's horror forms a powerful intergenerational relationship. Importantly, while Scary German Guy from *The Monster Squad* and Luke's grandmother from *The Witches* do provide assistance to the child protagonists, they are physically unable to help the children at crucial moments, e.g. during *The Monster Squad's* climactic battle between the children and the monsters, and when Luke is captured by the witches. The elderly allies are thus integral to the protagonists' success but do not interfere with the processes of personal growth, maturity and empowerment that the child characters undergo.

The elderly ally trope can also be tied to the socio-historical context in which *The Monster Squad* and *The Witches* were made. As mentioned above, from the 1980s increasing numbers of children were living in single-parent households and households in which both parents or the sole parent worked outside of the home. US census data also shows that in the mid-1980s grandparents were the second most common providers of child care (Laughlin, 2013: 9). If many American families of the era relied on grandparents for child care, it is logical that children under the care of the elderly is presented positively in popular culture. If read in light of Rose's argument that children's fiction unconsciously addresses the desires and concerns of adults, this might work to reassure adult viewers of their children's safety in the hands of the elderly when parents are absent.

Further subversion of stranger danger anxiety occurs in *The Monster Squad* through the film's depiction of Frankenstein's Monster. This subversion continues to suggest an address to the concerns of adults about child safety. The film draws particularly upon Universal's 1931 adaptation of *Frankenstein*. This is especially relevant to this discussion as the 1930s in the US, like the 1980s, were a time of heightened moral panic regarding sexual 'abnormalities', including paedophilia (Freedman, 2013: 187-89). In light of this context, *Frankenstein* has been read as portraying the Monster as a proxy for a child molester. This is strongly invited by a famous scene mentioned in Chapter One, in which the Monster brings harm to a little girl, Maria. In the scene in question, the Monster encounters Maria next to a lake and joins her in tossing flowers into the water, delighted at how they float on the surface (Figure 4.6). When he runs out of flowers, the Monster reaches toward Maria (Figure 4.7). A cut away does not reveal what happens until later in the film when the girl's father (Michael Mark) is shown carrying her lifeless body through the streets. This strongly implies the Monster's role in her death, and for a 1930s audience surrounded by rampant moral panic about child molestation, may have also suggested that a rape occurred (Curtis, 1998: 154). It is important to note that, as stated in Chapter One, this scene was the result of heavy cuts



Figure 4.6: *The Monster and Maria in Frankenstein.*



Figure 4.7: *The Monster reaches for Maria.*



Figure 4.8: *Phoebe plays by a pond in The Monster Squad's re-enactment of Frankenstein.*



Figure 4.9: *The feet of the Monster set an ominous tone.*

made by the Production Code Administration in 1938, after several state censorship boards had already made their own cuts to the film earlier in the decade. In the uncut version of the scene, the Monster is shown throwing Maria into the lake in lieu of flowers, not understanding that she will not float. The harm that comes to her is thus an accident which paints the Monster as a misunderstood and unfairly persecuted victim (Towlson, 2014: 39). Nevertheless, the missing footage was not restored to the film until 1986, making the censored version of the film which inadvertently depicts the Monster as a danger to children the dominant narrative for several decades. *The Monster Squad*, in heavily referencing the censored version of this scene from *Frankenstein*, appears to deliberately address and exploit contemporary 1980s adult anxiety about paedophilia and child endangerment.

*The Monster Squad's* re-enactment of the lake scene from *Frankenstein* sets up an expectation of its version of the Monster as a villain. Like the censored version of the scene in *Frankenstein*, *The Monster Squad* cuts away at a crucial moment so as to imply that the Monster harms a little girl, Phoebe. Phoebe is shown in an establishing shot playing happily

by a pond in an echo of *Frankenstein* (Figure 4.8). Then, in a close-up, her face is obscured by a shadow and the footsteps and heavy breathing of another figure are heard. The film cuts to show the large feet of the figure in an over-the-shoulder shot, accompanied by further breathing and an ominous note on the soundtrack, before cutting away (Figure 4.9). Five minutes pass before Phoebe is revealed to be alive, safe, and that she has befriended the Monster. The sequence is therefore deliberately constructed to elicit tension, regardless of whether viewers recognise the reference to *Frankenstein*. Arguably, however, those who do recognise the sequence may be left wondering whether Phoebe will suffer a similar fate as Maria – whether the rape implied by the censored version of the scene, or the drowning that is evident in the full, uncensored version that had been released on VHS and laserdisc one year before the theatrical release of *The Monster Squad*.

As discussed in Chapter One, *The Monster Squad* is one of several children's horror texts that rework the Frankenstein myth into something far more suitable for and appealing to children. This popularity is likely because of the Monster's childlike nature that may invite sympathy and identification from child viewers. One text with interesting similarities to *The Monster Squad* in terms of its sympathetic treatment of the Monster is *Alvin and the Chipmunks Meet Frankenstein*. In both texts the Monster becomes 'adopted' by children, who are initially frightened but realise that the Monster is kind and harmless, and the children work to socialise him into contemporary society. In *Chipmunks* this involves teaching the Monster how to make friends and to share, but *The Monster Squad* takes a more irreverent approach to socialising the Monster, in keeping with the film's general tone and treatment of childhood. Phoebe, for example, teaches the Monster youth-associated phrases like 'Bogus' and 'Gimme a break'. In other words, the Monster is accepted by the children in these texts as a peer. This treatment of the Monster in *The Monster Squad* as a sympathetic and child-like creature, rather than a threat to children, suggests an address to the interests of child viewers rather than those of adults. In fact, the film appears to

deliberately play into contemporaneous adult concerns that any stranger could be a child molester by suggesting that the Monster and Scary German Guy are villains, before upending these expectations to show that not all strangers are necessarily 'risky' strangers. The subversive use of monstrous characters to undermine adult concerns about paedophilia and address the fears and pleasures of children continues with the presentation of another of the film's monsters: Count Dracula.

### **'I don't bite': Dracula as child predator and totalitarian adult authority**

The final part of this discussion of *The Monster Squad* attends to the film's true villain: Count Dracula, the leader of the monsters and master of Frankenstein's Monster. Dracula's presentation does not become subverted to reveal that he is actually on the side of the children, like Scary German Guy and the Monster. However, Dracula's presentation nonetheless forms an important part of what is read here as *The Monster Squad's* mocking attitude toward late-twentieth century fears of stranger danger. This hinges upon the context of what Dracula, and vampires generally, are thought to symbolise in horror cinema.

According to Weinstock, 'Vampire movies are always, inevitably, about sex on some level' (2012: 7). This view is widely shared by other scholars. David Pirie argues that the erotic constitutes the primary appeal of vampire cinema (1977: 6) and Richard Dyer reads the biting, bloodsucking and exchange of bodily fluids involved in vampirism as sexual acts (1988: 54). Dyer reads the vampire subversively as an apt vessel with which to explore homosexuality, given that 'vampirism can be taken to evoke the thrill of a forbidden sexuality' (ibid.: 64). Conversely, for Twitchell it is precisely 'inappropriate seduction' where the horror of Dracula lies (1985: 160). Universal played into the obvious sexuality of the vampire by releasing their 1931 adaptation of *Dracula* on Valentine's Day and publicising it with the tagline, 'The story of the strangest Passion the world has ever known!' What, then, are we to think when vampires appear in children's fiction? If, as Weinstock claims, the

vampire cannot be divorced from sex, this adds an uncomfortable subtext to any vampire narrative created for children. However, Weinstock does not consider vampires in children's horror films or the way that children might respond to vampires. As argued in Chapter Three, significant moves are made in children's horror films to distance child-vampires from their 'horrific', i.e. inherently violent and sexual, lineage. *The Monster Squad* differs from those children's vampire narratives as it contains an *adult* vampire, one who invites a reading of sexual subtext given his presentation as a predatory adult male who pursues virginal, predominately female, child victims. This reading is also justified due to the film's production in the context of heightened societal fears of child sexual abuse. This aligns with Weinstock's assertion that 'what each vampire film has to say about sex obviously will vary depending upon time and place' (2012: 7).

A metaphorical connection between paedophilia and vampirism was made by therapists in the 1980s, who observed that people abused in childhood often grew up to become abusers or the wives of abusers. This became known as the 'vampire theory' (Jenkins, 1998: 138). Of course, it is unlikely that child viewers of *The Monster Squad* would read this subtext into the film. It should also be noted that there is nothing overtly sexual about the way that Dracula is performed in the film. If the performance of Duncan Regehr is compared to that of Bela Lugosi in Universal's *Dracula*, there are striking differences. Lugosi performs Dracula with a sophisticated, gentlemanly seduction that comes through in the combination of his intense stare, his gentle, melodic and heavily accented voice, and his graceful movements and gestures. Regehr's Dracula, by contrast, is performed with a haughtiness that comes through in his stiff posture and English accent. Rather than a sexualised figure, *The Monster Squad's* Dracula might be seen, particularly by child viewers, as representing totalitarian authority in the vein of other child-hating villains from children's popular culture, such as *Peter Pan's* Captain Hook and *Matilda's* Miss Trunchbull (Dahl, 1988). Where other adults in the film – whether parents, teachers or the police – are almost

comically ignorant and unauthoritative, Dracula is an embodiment of pure evil and adult authority. This is clearly demonstrated when he burns down the Monster Squad's clubhouse, the private, sacred space they had carved out for themselves away from their parents and teachers. Yet if, as Weinstock claims, 'it is next to impossible [for adults] to think the cinematic vampire without thinking sex' (2012: 22), and vampires are frequently read as embodying inappropriate or forbidden sexuality, *The Monster Squad's* references to Dracula's pursuit of children can certainly be read as allusions to paedophilic desire.

Some of these allusions to paedophilic desire are made in the film's inclusion of familiar motifs from Bram Stoker's 1897 novel and which have recurred in adaptations and appropriations of the character since. For example, Dracula kidnaps three teenage schoolgirls who are coded as virginal through their clothing of high-collared white blouses and ties. Dracula turns them into his vampire brides, whereupon they take on sexualised appearances in billowing, white gowns. Some lines of dialogue can also be taken as having a double meaning that Dracula both wants to harm and seduce children: when he says to Del, 'I will have your son', and when Frankenstein's Monster tells the Squad that 'Master wants children...', followed by pregnant pause before finishing the sentence with '...dead'. Dracula's sexual threat to children reaches an apex with regards to Phoebe, whose encounter with Dracula forms the film's climax. With the earlier sequence of Phoebe and Frankenstein's Monster by the pond, the film has already taken advantage of Phoebe's status as a vulnerable young girl to elicit anxiety. In addition, Phoebe is persistently coded as being vulnerable to attack by predators in that she frequently wears red. This associates her with Little Red Riding Hood, who is also the target of a (potentially sexual) predator: the Big Bad Wolf.<sup>6</sup> The most

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<sup>6</sup> The colour of Little Red Riding Hood's cloak is often read as symbolising menstrual blood, the wolf as symbolising predatory, animalistic male sexuality, and the journey through the woods as 'indicating the transition from innocent child to knowing woman' (Short, 2006: x). See also Catherine Orenstein (2002) and Alan Dundes (1991).

significant detail that highlights Phoebe's vulnerability from sexual abuse and elicits anxiety from an adult perspective is the film's emphasis on her virginity.

The Monster Squad discovers from Van Helsing's diary that a virgin must read an incantation from the diary in order to open the portal to limbo. The gender of the virgin is not specified by the diary, but for whatever reason it does not occur to the boys that they are likely all virgins. Although 'virgin' is now widely used to refer to sexually inexperienced people of either sex, its Latin root, 'virgo', refers specifically to the female sex (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). However, there is no indication that the boys are aware of this fact. That the film places a strange amount of emphasis on female virginity is significant, especially as virginity has historically been more highly valued in women than in men with regards to their eligibility for marriage. Within this context, the film's treatment of Patrick's older sister (Lisa Fuller), who the boys approach to be their virgin, is very troubling. Patrick and Rudy ask the (unnamed) sister probing questions about her sexual activity. When she refuses to answer they blackmail her with nude photographs that had been taken of her earlier, as the Squad clubhouse has a convenient view of her bedroom window. She admits that she is a virgin, but during the film's climax she confesses that she lied. She therefore finds herself the victim of a double standard stemming from the interests of males in her private sexual history. She is of interest or of use to the Squad members as a sexual object to be gazed upon unknowingly, but becomes cast aside at the revelation that she may have engaged in sexual activity without their knowledge or permission, and for her own pleasure. No matter the film's seemingly subversive pro-child, anti-adult agenda, its treatments of gender and sexuality remain highly problematic. This issue is returned to and explored in further depth below in relation to *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*.

Upon the revelation that Patrick's sister is not a virgin, Phoebe is turned to instead. By this point the significance of Phoebe's virginity is great: the fate of the world rests upon





Figure 4.10: Dracula gently strokes Phoebe, his virginal victim, before violently grabbing her.

it, and it is up to her to make up for the sexual 'indiscretion' of Patrick's sister. The preceding set up of Phoebe's youth and vulnerability arguably adds further weight and anxiety to her virginity, as highlighting her virginal status raises the possibility of that status being reversed – something that could only come about as a violation by someone, a predator, with inappropriate sexual desires. In *The Monster Squad* this role is filled by Dracula. The point at which Dracula approaches Phoebe, having realised that she has the amulet and that she is the virgin who has the ability to foil his plan for world domination, is presented as the most suspenseful point of the film. Dracula spots Phoebe from a distance and strides toward her with unhurried purpose. Scary German Guy is cast aside, and Phoebe's parents are too far away to do anything but watch as Dracula reaches Phoebe and extends his hand to stroke her gently on the cheek with his finger – a gesture that takes full advantage of readings of the vampire as a sexual predator in order to elicit anxiety and suspense – and then grabs her by the chin and lifts her off the ground (Figure 4.10). Concurrently, the musical score builds in intensity and volume before halting in anticipation of the climax. As Dracula is a vampire and there are allusions to paedophilia within the text, what might be assumed to happen next is for Dracula to bite Phoebe, a violent act that is 'part seduction and part rape' (Weinstock, 2012: 7). To do so would be to play into adult anxieties concerning child molestation, yet this is not what Dracula does. Instead, he says with cold menace, 'Give me

the amulet, you bitch!’ This is, arguably, an unexpected turn of events; not simply the fact that Dracula does not bite Phoebe, but also due to the transgressive use of the word ‘bitch’ in reference to a child in a film addressed to children. If anything, this is a moment of such surprise at the end of a huge build-up of tension that it becomes amusing.

Just as Frankenstein’s Monster does not drown or hurt Phoebe and Scary German Guy does not harm the boys, Dracula does not act as anticipated. This is not to say that Dracula, like the other two, is set up as a villain only for this to be subverted and for him to be revealed as good. Dracula is unequivocally evil, but this can still be considered a moment of subversion. It plays into expectations that Phoebe is in danger of a metaphorical rape by a predator, only to show that this is not the case. That the performance and appearance of Dracula are not particularly sexual can be considered as clues to his intentions. The moment thus appears to mock the rampant fears of stranger danger and display them as less of an issue than they were presented by the media at the time.

This upending of expectations can also be read as a resistance to interpretation, of ‘over-reading’ a text in order to find evidence to support a particular argument or reading. In relation to this, Coats takes issue with Kincaid’s work on the role of the paedophile as a cultural scapegoat, discussed above, in which he sees Captain Hook as fulfilling this role in *Peter Pan*. Kincaid points to a moment in the text when Hook watches Peter sleeping in what Kincaid interprets as a seductive pose (Kincaid, 1992: 275). Hook is prevented from getting closer and acting upon whatever ‘desire’ is stirred in him, which Kincaid reads as being sexual in nature (ibid.: 285). Coats disagrees and argues that had Hook had the opportunity he would certainly have ‘violated’ Peter, but by killing rather than caressing him (2006: 7). Similarly, it is impossible to know what Dracula would have done to Phoebe had he not been interrupted, and it certainly does not have to have been sexual. Nevertheless, the Dracula/Phoebe interaction must be read in the context of the whole film, especially its

irreverent and carnivalesque tone and the subverted expectations of Scary German Guy and Frankenstein's Monster. In this context, that Dracula does not bite or harm Phoebe is precisely the point: the film appears to deliberately draw upon adult fears of child abuse and paedophilia only to undermine those fears, display them as unfounded, and to privilege the child characters and audience. In other words, the film addresses the adult audience only to tauntingly say, 'This film is not for you or about your fears.' Such a tone is not as easily detectable in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*. The remainder of this chapter turns to these films in which the perpetrators of child abuse are presented as women, in contrast to *The Monster Squad* in which the predators are male, and considers the extent to which the gender of these representations of child predators is significant. The question of address persists throughout: not only the question of whether these films are primarily addressed to children or adults, but whether in their depictions of abject and unruly women they address fears of adult male viewers above all others.

### Wicked Women: the witch as ultimate child predator in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*

As discussed in Chapter Two, 'woman' is among Wood's list of 'others' who in the horror film embody the fears of the dominant ideology (2003: 66). Throughout history and culture, this fear and hatred of women has frequently manifested in the figure of the witch, peaking with the practicing of witch trials (most popularly in the case of the Salem witch trials of 1692-93) in which predominantly women, and some men, whose lifestyles or talents posed a threat to the dominant conservative ideology were accused of witchcraft and executed. Sharon Russell explains that '[m]en have used [the myth of the witch] as a means of confirming deeply held suspicions as to the true nature of women, a product of the misogyny inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition' (1984: 113). Images of witches as transgressive, evil women who deserve to be punished pervade Hollywood cinema, especially in children's/child-

friendly films from *The Wizard of Oz's* Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton) to the wicked women of Disney's animated fairy tales. The witch informs cultural constructions of acceptable womanhood – or, rather, a reminder of *unacceptable* womanhood, with 'witch' being an informal derogatory term for an unpleasant (and sometimes ugly and/or elderly) woman. This discussion reads the depictions of the witches in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* within the context of this cultural misogyny, but ties it specifically to the 1980s and 1990s contemporaneous anxieties surrounding stranger danger and the backlash towards second-wave feminism. This builds an argument that, by portraying powerful, single and emasculating women as the greatest threat to children, these films predominantly address an adult male viewing perspective.

### **Matters of sex**

*The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* are both prime examples of the misogynistic depiction of the witch. The witches in these films are crazed, power-hungry women who dominate men and irrationally despise children. In both films, the witches are punished for these transgressions. In *The Witches*, based on the 1983 Roald Dahl novel of the same name, the protagonist is Luke (Jasen Fisher), a boy whose parents are killed in a car accident while on holiday in Norway. He comes under the care of his grandmother, who happens to be highly knowledgeable about witches and, it is implied, has battled them in the past. When she falls ill they go on holiday to a seaside hotel in England which Luke discovers is also the meeting place of England's entire witch population, called there by the Grand High Witch (Angelica Huston). Luke discovers by spying on them that they plan to rid the world of all children by turning them into mice, and witnesses them perform this act on another child named Bruno (Charlie Potter). When Luke is caught, he is also transformed. Stuck in the form of a talking rodent, he and his grandmother try to stop the witches from harming further children. *Hocus Pocus'* witches, the Sanderson Sisters, hail from Salem, 1693, thus linking them directly with the Salem witch trials. The sisters, Winnie (Bette Midler), Mary (Kathy Najimy) and Sarah

(Sarah Jessica Parker), desire eternal youth and beauty which they attempt to achieve by performing a spell that requires sucking the life-forces from children. They are caught doing this to a girl, Emily (Amanda Shepherd), by her older brother, Thackery Binx (Sean Murray). The witches transform Binx (as he is addressed throughout the film) into a talking, immortal cat before they are captured and hung by the townspeople for killing Emily. Three centuries later, on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1993, they are accidentally resurrected by the sceptical teenager Max (Omri Katz) when he visits their old house while trick-or-treating with his little sister Dani (Thora Birch) and classmate Allison (Vinessa Shaw). With the assistance of Binx they strive to stop the Sanderson Sisters from draining the life-forces of all of the children in Salem.

Much criticism has been targeted at the novel version of *The Witches* for its linkage between witches, women and evil. Its allegation that a 'witch is always a woman' (Dahl, 1983: 9) and its encouragement that child readers should suspect any woman of being a witch have provoked particular ire from feminist critics. Catherine Itzin (1985: 13), for example, observes that the novel's language is similar to the fifteenth century witch hunter's manual *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kramer and Sprenger, 1487). This text contains misogynistic and paranoid statements on the 'wickedness of women' in attempts to justify witch hunting: 'What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment [...] an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!' (ibid.: 43). Itzin argues that, similarly to *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Witches* 'teaches boys to learn to become men who hate and harm women' (1985: 13). Anne-Marie Bird, building upon Itzin's criticisms, argues that Nicolas Roeg's film adaptation is even more egregiously misogynistic in its depiction of witches, and therefore women, as the embodiment of evil (1998). For example, the film underlines the witches' wickedness through the use of Biblical associations between women and sin. The Grand High Witch is referred to as the 'most evil woman in all creation' and goes by the name Eva, a derivative of Eve that carries associations of seduction, temptation and the fall of man (ibid.: 120-21). These associations are also invited when another witch, credited only as the Woman in Black

(Anne Lambton), tempts Luke with a snake in an attempt to kidnap him. These observations of Bird's in relation to *The Witches* also apply to *Hocus Pocus*. In this film the witches have a direct link with Satanic forces, as Winnie claims that her spell book was a gift from the Devil himself. While searching for children on Halloween they encounter a man in a Devil costume (Garry Marshall), mistaking him for their 'Master' and his contemporary kitchen for a torture chamber. This highlights a key difference between the two films' tones and their depictions of witches: Roeg's witches largely invite fear and disgust, and while they harness motifs associated with the Devil they are presented as the most evil beings in all of existence, answering only to one of their own, the Grand High Witch (henceforth Eva). In contrast, the Sanderson Sisters are predominantly constructed as comical figures whose seventeenth century origins clash with their 1990s surroundings, causing them to become easily baffled and intimidated by late-twentieth century society. Most pertinently, Victoria Godwin points out that they are 'defined by their relationship to more powerful sources', such as the Devil's spell book (2012: 94). That the witches rely on a patriarchal figure for their power prompts Godwin to liken this detail to the power exchange implied by the misogynistic accusation in *Malleus Maleficarum* that witches steal men's penises (ibid.).

These readings of *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* as drawing upon misogynistic associations between women, witchcraft and sin indicate that these texts are not primarily addressing a child audience at all but rather, in the words of Bird, privileging the 'fears and fantasies' of adult men (1998: 121). The following discussion builds upon Bird's work on *The Witches* and also applies her argument to *Hocus Pocus* in order to more strongly tie the films' misogynistic depictions of witches, female power and female sexuality to the contemporaneous socio-cultural fears of stranger danger. In so doing, this discussion continues to question whose fears, concerns and desires are really being addressed by these texts: those of children, or adults? Specifically, adult viewers who are invited to view the film with a heterosexual male gaze.

The misogynistic depiction of the witches in *The Witches and Hocus Pocus* is partially conveyed through their visual presentation. In both texts, the witches disguise or modify their true appearances in order to appear more visually attractive than they truly are. Bird argues that the overtly sexualised presentations of two characters in *The Witches* are particularly egregious in addressing the fears and desires of an adult male viewer. Bird draws upon Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine' (1986 and 1993) to argue that the film's visual depiction of these witches resides in the sexist notion of female sexuality as 'other' and a source of horror. As defined by Creed, the monstrous feminine is a patriarchal construct of 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (1986: 44). One version of this is the 'phallic mother' who makes up for her lack of a penis (which in psychoanalytic theory is a source of castration anxiety) with other phallic body parts. However, her very possession of these phallic appendages also alludes to her threat to men as a castrator (ibid.). In *The Witches*, Eva and the Woman in Black fit this description with the phallic substitutes of high-heeled shoes and long, gloved fingers. Bird also notes that these and other sexualised costume details, like their glamorous black outfits with low-cut necklines, red lipstick and, in the case of Eva, a black lace veil and purple feather boa, align Eva and the Woman in Black with the *femme fatale* (1998: 122) (Figure 4.11). This archetype is a sexualised emasculator whom Creed identifies as 'a classic example of the phallic woman' (1993: 157). Bird also draws upon Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) to argue that the camera's voyeuristic exploration of Eva's body serves to demystify and objectify her, thus lulling the male – within the film and in the audience – into a false sense of security (Bird, 1998: 123). It is thus all the more horrifying when Eva removes her mask and reveals her true form (Figure 4.12). The phallic imagery becomes more exaggerated as her nose and fingers are elongated and her figure becomes more skeletal; even her cleft chin protrudes as two round lumps that resemble testicles. However, the *femme fatale* beauty that once combined with the phallic imagery to make it



Figure 4.11: Eva, the Grand High Witch, in her femme fatale guise.



Figure 4.12: Eva unmasked.



Figure 4.13: Eva seductively bends toward and pouts at Bruno as he transforms into a mouse.



Figure 4.14: Eva's teeth, representative of the vagina dentata, in close-up.



Figure 4.15: The Sanderson Sisters suck the life force out of Emily.



Figure 4.16: The Sanderson Sisters perform a spell to turn Binx into a cat.



comforting is now absent, leaving only a grotesque and threatening figure. Finally, Eva's plump red lips part seductively to emphasise her teeth and gums, allowing them to be read as representations of the castrating *vagina dentata*, or 'toothed vagina' (ibid.: 124). In this reading, Eva's in both her disguised and true forms is firmly constructed to address male insecurities and anxieties.

In accordance with this reading of the emasculating female, the male characters in the film are constructed as comical and ineffective: the hotel manager (Rowan Atkinson) who is constantly undermined by his staff and guests, Bruno's father (Bill Paterson) who unsuccessfully attempts to flirt with Eva much to the chagrin of his wife (Brenda Blethyn), and the chef (Jim Carter) who becomes hysterical when he believes there is a mouse in his trousers only to be pointedly told that there's 'nothing much in there'. In the film's most overt allusion to paedophilia, Eva's sexuality also poses a threat to male children as it is during the two sequences in which Luke and Bruno are transformed into mice where the threatening sensuality of Eva is the most heightened. Before and during the transformation she seductively bends down toward Bruno and makes kissing faces at him (Figure 4.13). Bird also notes that her heavy breathing and thrusting hips could be construed as the build up to an 'orgasmic release' (1998: 122). During Luke's transformation several close-ups of Eva's face emphasise her red lips and teeth, or, again, *vagina dentata* (Figure 4.14). This motif and the gender of the children indicates that Luke and Bruno are being figuratively castrated at these moments – from their human bodies and identities, and are in danger of being 'castrated', or rejected, from their families. Indeed, although Luke's grandmother accepts him in his mouse form, Bruno's parents are horrified. Similarly, *Hocus Pocus* contains allusions to paedophilia which privilege an adult viewing perspective. The Sanderson Sisters literally suck the life force from children, which necessitates the witches leaning toward the children with lips puckered, as if to kiss them (Figure 4.15). There is also a sexual element to the way the witches cast their spell on Binx to turn him into a cat, as Winnie twirls her fingers

seductively and rhythmically moves her hips from side to side (Figure 4.16). The spell's words 'trim him of his baby fat' uncomfortably highlight Binx's youthful body. The most overt sexual allusions are in the film's emphasis on Max's virginity. The resurrection of the witches can only occur if a virgin lights the black-flamed candle in their cottage. Max, sceptical of the supernatural and wishing to impress Allison, performs this fateful act.

In each film, these allusions to paedophilia (the ultimate threat posed by the 'risky stranger' to children) blur the boundary between an address to children and adults. The threat of Bruno being rejected by his parents in *The Witches* indicates an address to childish concerns of abandonment and separation anxiety, while the Sanderson Sisters' intimidation and desire to punish and kill children in *Hocus Pocus* clearly indicates an address to fears of death, the supernatural and adult authority that may resonate with child viewers. On the other hand, the addition of symbolic castration and allusions to paedophilia in *The Witches* indicates an additional address to an adult viewer who is encouraged to view the film from the perspective of a male gaze. Similarly, the allusions to paedophilia and the emphasis on Max's virginity in *Hocus Pocus* are unlikely to bear any meaning for child viewers, who are less likely to understand what a virgin is. For adults, however, emphasising Max's virginity potentially increases the anxiety caused by the endangerment posed to him by the witches' predatory sexuality. That an adult viewer is privy to *both* levels of address throughout these films, and a child viewer likely only one level, places the adult in a privileged viewing position and indicates that the film's address is catered more toward adult fears of threats both to children and to male sexuality and dominance.

So far, this discussion has assumed that allusions to sexuality bear no meaning to children at all. This aligns with the views of Tatar (1992: xxiii) and Sheldon Cashdan, who both reject the notion that children pick up on sexual allusions in fairy tales. However, to make this assumption is at the risk of over simplifying and underestimating the extent to which

children pick up on adult anxieties and relationships. According to Cashdan, '[m]any of the concerns that occupy the minds of the very young have less to do with sex than with thoughts and impulses that affect their relationships with significant figures in their lives' (1999: 12). However, if these 'significant figures' include their own parents, then sexual matters may well be a pertinent concern to children. Even without detailed knowledge of sexual relationships, children may understand the implied threat to the structure of the (nuclear) family due to interference from a sexually alluring third party, i.e. Eva in *The Witches*. This can be seen in the aforementioned example of Bruno's father, Mr Jenkins, flirting with Eva. This scene bears no relevance to the plot, but heavy emphasis is given to the increasing disapproval of Mrs Jenkins, who has a clear view of her husband's indiscretion, inferring the danger that Eva poses to their marriage. This threat is made more apparent by the contrast between the visual presentations of Mrs Jenkins and Eva: Mrs Jenkins wears a modest, loose-fitting beige dress and large spectacles, giving her a slightly frumpy appearance in opposition to Eva's figure-hugging black dress and heavily made-up appearance. Best argues that the increase in single-parent families and working mothers during this period of US history helped to foster a generation of 'unsupervised latch-key kids' who might be more vulnerable to adult predators (1990: 95). Thus, the threat to parental relationships in *The Witches* has the potential to resonate with children and adults alike if this is associated with children being more likely to be left without parental supervision, and thus without protection from 'risky strangers'.

The scene in which Mr Jenkins flirts with Eva can also be subjected to an alternate reading that is entirely unrelated to sex and adult relationships. Mr Jenkins converses with Eva about the charity that the witches use as the guise of their meeting – the wryly named Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (RSPCC). When he tosses some change into a charity plate held out by Eva's assistant, Miss Irvine (Jane Horrocks), he unknowingly contributes to the very cause that threatens the life of his own child. This speaks to the fear

that a child predator could be anyone, anywhere – even someone who purports to protect children – and that adults might be implicated, even if unknowingly or unintentionally, in their own child’s endangerment. This anxiety is also drawn upon in *Hocus Pocus*. Max and Dani’s parents attend a Halloween party which is crashed by the Sanderson Sisters, who perform a cover of the song ‘I Put a Spell on You’, and in so doing literally enchant all of the adults at the party to dance all night and remain oblivious to their children’s plight. This ‘intoxication’ may be associated, in the minds of adults, with being drunk or drugged. This can be identified as a moment of dual address that holds appeal/anxiety for children and adults simultaneously. In demonstrating the inability of adults to protect children, or their implication in their own children coming to harm, each of these moments in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* are potentially highly unsettling to both adult and child viewers. On the other hand, the way that they ridicule and expose the ineffectuality ordinary adults may hold a childish appeal similar to that of Del’s ineffectuality in *The Monster Squad*, in that they put the power and responsibility to save the day in the hands of the child characters. These sequences therefore illustrate Wall’s concept of dual address that allows a more nuanced and complex ‘conjunction of interests’ of adult and child viewers at once (1991: 35). Crucially, this also speaks to this thesis’ aim to highlight the way that children’s horror films can be read as providing a model child viewer with experiences of both fear and pleasure, and that more often than not these feelings are intricately bound together.

The case can therefore be made that an address to children is still present in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, even when they also attempt to draw upon adult-oriented fears. However, that these adult fears are strongly tied to misogynistic depictions of female sexuality as threatening and emasculating is nonetheless extremely problematic. The remainder of this discussion examines these films’ depictions of women in further detail and relates them to the broader context of 1980s and early-1990s gender politics and anxieties

about child endangerment. This reveals an even stronger bias within these films toward adult male anxieties, rather than those of children.

**'Backlash': the witch as failed/transgressive woman**

It is mentioned earlier in this discussion that a crucial difference between *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* is that the Sanderson Sisters of the latter are constructed as comical figures in contrast to the highly threatening Eva of the former. This is an important tonal difference that is worth exploring in relation to these films' attitudes toward women.

Like Eva, *Hocus Pocus*' Sanderson Sisters can be read as 'castrating' figures who dominate or harm men, like Winnie's ex-lover Billy the zombie (Doug Jones), who she figuratively castrates by sewing his mouth shut. However, their portrayal as predominantly comical figures who are 'out of their own time' means that much humour comes at their expense, and often at the hands of male characters: Billy, for example, pulls the stitches out of his mouth to call Winnie a wench, trollop, and a 'buck-toothed, mop-riding firefly from hell'. That they are less threatening than Eva is also reflected by their costuming. In contrast to contrast Eva's simple, contemporary glamour, the Sanderson Sisters wear elaborate yet modest floor-length dresses with laced-up bodices, long sleeves, long striped stockings and heavy, billowing capes. In place of Eva's black dress, their clothing is made from textured and richly coloured fabrics in deep hues of emerald green, blood orange, deep purple and dusky pink. Their comparative lack of threat is also conveyed in their characterisation. While Eva is malicious and cunning, two of the three Sanderson Sisters, Sarah and Mary, have 'ditzzy' personalities. Sarah's is displayed in the film's opening scene set in 1693 when suspicious villagers come to the Sisters' house, demanding to know what they are doing. Winnie and Mary concoct excuses, but Sarah exclaims with glee that they are 'Sucking the lives out of little children!', thus giving cause for them to be hanged. In addition to this, her flirtatious manner and pale blonde hair allow her to be read as a version of the 'blonde bimbo'

stereotype. Mary is also portrayed as being dim-witted, frequently shown with a slack-jawed expression or fooling around with Sarah, much to the annoyance of Winnie. Despite being the middle sister in terms of age, Mary is depicted as the most crone-like with her portly figure, slightly hunched posture, shabbier clothes in comparison with her sisters', and her messy, lopsided hairstyle. Mary and Sarah both have unique magical skills – Mary's being her strong sense of smell for sniffing out children, and Sarah's her siren-like singing voice that has a hypnotic effect on children – however, they are both inferior to and reliant upon Winnie, who is highly skilled in casting enchantments and brewing potions.

It is therefore Winnie, the eldest, smartest, and most magically powerful sister, who serves as the closest comparison to *The Witches'* Eva. Though less overtly sexually alluring than Eva, she shares with Eva some reproductive imagery that associates her with the monstrous feminine, such as her long 'phallic' fingernails and her very prominent teeth and lips which may be read as castrating *vagina dentata*. Again, however, rather than being wholly frightening Winnie has an air of the absurd which threatens to undermine her authority. In particular, this is achieved by her cartoonish make-up which consists of two perfectly round circles of blush on her cheeks, her buck teeth, and lipstick painted in such a way that gives her lips the appearance of being permanently puckered. The appearances of all three Sisters thus contribute to their constructions as figures of comedy and ridicule.

The construction of the Sanderson Sisters as figures of ridicule is also achieved through their misunderstandings of late-twentieth century life. These misunderstandings highlight their ineffectuality as women – that is, conservative expectations of roles that women are traditionally assumed to occupy: mothers, wives and homemakers. Thus, the witches in both *Hocus Pocus* and *The Witches* are paradoxically coded as 'risky strangers' while also being criticised for their failure to fulfil women's traditional roles within familial units. The Sanderson Sisters fail at motherhood, for example, through their hatred of

children and lack of maternal instinct – a fact that is humorously displayed by Winnie’s line, ‘You know I always wanted a child, and now I think I’ll have one... ON TOAST!’ They share this trait with Roeg’s witches who cannot bear to be near children due to their perception that children smell like dogs’ droppings. Roeg’s witches simultaneously parody motherhood and the concurrent societal anxiety of child endangerment by meeting at the hotel under the guise of the aforementioned fake children’s charity, the RSPCC. The only times either group of witches display maternal instinct is when it is directed toward inappropriate child substitutes: Winnie’s spell book gifted to her by the Devil, which is bound in human skin and has a real eye in the cover that implies sentience, and Eva’s black cat, Liebchen – a detail that aligns Eva with classic witch imagery as well as the derogatory stereotype of the ‘crazy cat lady’.

Roeg’s witches irrationally despise children for seemingly no reason, but the Sanderson Sisters take their failure at mothering further, and are aligned with fairy tale witches, in their aim to suck the youth out of children in order to prolong their own lives and enhance their beauty. On the use of imposter mothers, such as wicked stepmothers, in children’s literature, Ann Alston writes that the use of cosmetics reveals the fake mother as an ‘imposter who indulges her vanity at the expense of her family’s nourishment’ (2008: 112). Roeg’s witches are also highly concerned with appearance, in that they disguise themselves as ‘real’ women and betray the sanctity of motherhood by inverting the role of mother as nurturer and using food as a weapon; first, by using chocolate to lure Bruno to their meeting at the hotel, where they turn him into a mouse, and then in their plan to rid the world of children by opening sweet shops that sell poisoned treats. The Sanderson Sisters do not use food against children, but that this narrative of children endangered by strangers occurs on Halloween corresponds with dovetailing fears of stranger danger and Halloween Sadism.

Finally, the Sanderson Sisters also display ineffectuality at the traditional domestic roles expected of women when they use modern cleaning appliances in lieu of flying broomsticks. Winnie uses an ordinary household broom, Sarah a mop, and Mary a vacuum cleaner. This misuse of domestic items invites a double reading: first, in the humorous repurposing of these items associated with female domesticity, the witches transgress the roles that patriarchal society typically expects of women. However, their use of, and reliance upon, these domestic objects can be equally read as a sign of their dependence upon and continual policing by patriarchal structures and gender roles. Eva is not policed or ridiculed to the same extent as the Sanderson Sisters, but she nonetheless refuses to be domesticated, to occupy the roles of mother or wife, and is coded as evil and threatening (especially to the male sex) and is eventually punished because of it. This is obviously concerning with regards to these films' address to a child audience. Itzin's concern that the novel version of *The Witches* 'teaches boys to learn to become men who hate and harm women', particularly women who refuse to occupy domestic roles, may also apply to both the film adaptation of the novel and *Hocus Pocus* (1985: 13). Female child viewers, meanwhile, may come to believe that domestic roles are the only 'acceptable' ones available to them.

By inverting the traditional role of woman as reproducer, nurturer and carer, the witches become the very opposite: dangerous, unfamiliar threats to children, i.e. 'risky strangers'. Just why is it that these texts paint transgressive women as the sole perpetrators of child endangerment needs exploring in further detail. That these witches are policed and criticised for defying normative gender roles seems at odds with their respective films' late-twentieth century settings and production contexts. This is particularly interesting with regards to the Sanderson Sisters, who originate from the past. Literally a 'sisterhood' (a term that connotes female solidarity) of single, ageing and childless women who refuse to adopt 'traditional' female roles, their lifestyles align with the freedom of choice associated with late-twentieth century feminism despite their seventeenth century origins. However, a link



between witches and feminism has long been established. As Rachel Moseley notes, many feminist women-only and/or lesbian covens were formed in the context of second-wave feminism of the 1970s (2002: 409). These groups sought to reclaim the witch as a figure of female empowerment. Others have suggested that witches can be understood as the original fighters against the oppression of women who lead ‘unconventional’ lives (Morgan, 1970 and Purkiss, 1996 cited in Moseley, 2002: 410-11). This link between witchcraft and feminism allows a reading of the witch characters in both *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* as representing feminist values.

Eva, unlike the Sanderson Sisters, is not a woman out of her own time, but her refusal to adhere to normative gender roles, and punishment for this, can be contextualised within the film’s late-1980s/early-1990s setting. Bird suggests that Eva can be read as a representation of the ‘sexually assertive, economically independent, power-dressed, successful career woman’ that emerged during the 1980s (1998: 126). Power dressing, popularised by fashion consultant John T. Molloy in the late-1970s and 1980s, typically features shoulder-padded skirt-suits in neutral colours and conservative patterns. The aim of this is for women to acquire respect and authority in a typically masculine work environment, and requires a balancing act between seeming feminine – but not sexual – and masculine – but not to the extent that one apes men in their dress style (Molloy, 1978: 51). Yet while many of the witches in *The Witches* exhibit some of these elements in their costuming, some of them (Eva included) are arguably dressed too glamorously to fit this form of conservative power-dressing (Figure 4.17). Carol Dyhouse details that alongside the style of power dressing developed by Molloy was an alternate version – that of the ‘unashamedly predatory female’ as seen in the ‘bitch-heroines’ of US soap operas like Alexis (Joan Collins) in *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-9) (Dyhouse, 2010: 136). This look comprises of glamorous jewellery, shoulder pads and ‘carnivorously red’ lipstick (ibid.: 137) (Figure 4.18). As such, the style of power dressing that was intended by Molloy to be authoritative but conservative and



Figure 4.17: The 'power-dressed' witches.



Figure 4.18: Alexis, 'bitch heroine' and 1980s power-dresser, in *Dynasty* episode 'The Announcement' (8.04, tx. 14/10/1987).

unthreatening to male co-workers is combined with attributes of the sexually threatening *femme fatale* or Creed's monstrous woman. This look is much closer to what Eva adopts in *The Witches*, and further indicates that the film prioritises an address to adult male fears.

In reading Eva as a representation of the "castrating bitch" of the 1980s', Bird describes the film as 'a reflection of the [1980s'] crisis of identity provoked by the female encroaching on what was traditionally perceived as male territory' (1998: 126). Although the Sanderson Sisters do not exhibit power dressing in *Hocus Pocus*, they might be described as 'career women', a term often used to refer negatively to women who prioritise their professions over 'traditional' goals women are expected to have according to dominant hegemonic discourse: marriage and child-rearing. The Sanderson Sisters fit this description in that they put their 'profession' – witchcraft – above adopting traditional female domestic roles. To continue to read the representations of the witches in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* in the context of these 1980s gender politics can shed some light on why these women are painted as 'risky strangers'.

As *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* were released in 1990 and 1993 respectively, their misogynistic depictions of women who can be read as representations of the emasculating 'power woman' archetype or as embodying pseudo-feminist values allow them to be read as existing on the tail-end, or recipients of a trickle-down effect, of what Susan Faludi has

termed the 1980s' media-driven 'backlash' against second-wave feminism (1991: 14). Faludi argues that the backlash 'shaped much of Hollywood's portrayal of women in the eighties', and in turn Hollywood 'reinforced the backlash thesis: women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood' (ibid.: 141).<sup>7</sup> As such, many Hollywood films of this era present female characters who embody stereotypically feminist characteristics, i.e. they are single, childless career-oriented women who dress similarly to the power woman/*femme fatale* hybrid described above. Faludi pinpoints the glamorous and sexually assertive career woman Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) in *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987) as exemplifying this stereotype. Of particular interest to this discussion, Faludi notes that Alex is strongly coded as a witch, with her long fingernails and her home 'ringed by oil drums that burned like witches' cauldrons' (1991: 149). Like the witch characters in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, she also poses a threat to children and other innocent, vulnerable beings when she kidnaps a child and later boils the child's pet rabbit alive in a stove pot (another pseudo-witches' cauldron). The marriage of the witch and the power woman archetype in Alex highlights their similarities as women who have 'too much power' and thus become a threat to patriarchal dominance.

The 'backlash' context helps to explain why transgressive power woman/witch characters in texts like *Fatal Attraction*, *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* are presented as perpetrators of child endangerment. The key link is the home, in that 'stranger danger' refers to the fear that surged in the 1980s of children being endangered by unfamiliar adults outside of the home. The home is also associated with women, where they are traditionally considered to occupy domestic roles including the nurturer and carer of children. The independent power woman, however, 'transgresses' beyond the home (and beyond the role of mother) into the vaguely defined space of 'outside': the same space that was considered

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<sup>7</sup> Wood (2003: 183-85) and Molly Haskell (1987: 373) have also observed this 'antifeminist' nature of 1980s Hollywood.

in 1980s and early-1990s public discourse to have been occupied by 'risky strangers' who might harm children. In this era of the 'backlash' against feminism, the absence of the women *inside* of the home, protecting children, translates into the presence of women *outside* of the home, endangering them. Indeed, Rogers infers that working mothers were blamed in public discourse of the 1980s for children's vulnerability to abuse given that fears of this were 'often associated with the fact that an increasing number of mothers were in the workforce outside of the home', thus leaving children alone and susceptible to other harmful adults (2002: 95). Overall, the negative portrayals of woman who transgress normative gender roles in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* indicate an address to a highly conservative, patriarchal and adult viewing perspective.

The notion of the good mother within the home and dangerous women outside of the home fits into the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' women that the female sex has often been reduced to throughout history and culture. As summarised by Janey Place, 'the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in western culture. [...] She and her sister (or alter ego), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes' (1978: 47). The 'good' and 'bad' woman dichotomy can be seen at work within *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*. The way that this plays out in the latter significantly affects the masculinity and maturation of child protagonist Max. Max's narrative is read below as a reassuring demonstration of children's abilities to protect themselves from 'risky strangers' in the absence of 'safe' adults. This discussion therefore continues to engage with issues of gender and the question of whose fears, concerns and desires are being prioritised.

### **Becoming male, destroying the female**

In the 'backlash' texts of Faludi's study, the independent, assertive 'bad women' are always punished and the representatives of the dominant patriarchal ideology – either male

characters or appropriately feminine and unthreatening ‘good women’ – are rewarded. Similarly, in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* the evil witch characters are eventually killed, and the women and girls who survive the narratives are those who adhere to hegemonic norms of femininity, notably Eva’s put-upon assistant, Miss Irvine, who is read above as the ‘positive’ and unthreatening career woman. As a petite blonde woman wearing white and pastel colours, she is the opposite of the tall, haughty, black-haired Eva as the negative and emasculating career woman. Mid-way through the film Miss Irvine quits her job, fed up of being commanded by Eva. This spares her from the film’s gruesome climax in which Luke and his grandmother lace the other witches’ food with their own magic formula. Having been turned into mice, all of the witches bar Miss Irvine are then killed by the vermin-phobic hotel staff. Miss Irvine returns to Luke at the end of the film as a reformed ‘good witch’ to turn him back into a human boy – a protector of children and restorer of (human) masculinity, rather than a threat to either of these. This is a departure from the ending of Dahl’s novel, which features no Miss Irvine character and Luke is not restored but remains a mouse. The narrative arc of Luke in the film, and the effect of the film’s altered ending, is given further attention toward the end of this chapter.

Like Miss Irvine, the key female survivors in *Hocus Pocus*, Dani and Allison, share a function in establishing the masculinity and maturity of the male protagonist, Max. Both girls embody ‘safe’ femininity in that they are young and fair-haired, while Allison wears white and cream shades and is framed as an acceptable romantic match for Max. Both girls also express a fascination with witches early in the film; Dani even dresses and play-acts as a witch for Halloween. However, like Miss Irvine, Dani and Allison eventually come to reject the witch identity, as implied by Dani’s vitriolic remark that Winnie is the ‘ugliest thing that’s ever lived’ (provoking Winnie’s wrath) and that both girls have witnessed first-hand, and become targets of, the witches’ malevolence. This allows an assumption that the association between the witches’ unruly womanhood and evil has made its mark. Lending credence to this is that

the three children are framed as a family unit as the film ends, with teenagers Max and Allison standing in as parents to the younger Dani, which is in direct opposition to the spinster-esque lifestyles of the child-hating, male-dominating Sanderson Sisters (Figure 4.19). Allison thus reinforces Max's masculinity in her role as love interest, in keeping with the Hollywood trope of the hero 'getting the girl'.



Figure 4.19: Allison, Dani and Max form a family unit at the end of Hocus Pocus.

Dani's role is more integral as it is through her endangerment by the witches that Max is forced into the role of heroic rescuer. Max begins the narrative as a surly teenager who is reluctant to partake in Halloween festivities and babysit his little sister, who wants Max to take her trick-or-treating as she is not allowed to go alone (possibly due to fears of stranger danger and/or Halloween Sadism). Max is also sceptical of the supernatural, a trait that displays a preference for the 'rational' and a furthering of his efforts to seem mature. However, Max's attempts to seem mature are undermined by a host of embarrassments including his inability to defend himself against bullies and references to his virginity. The former could be considered a failure to fulfil traditional expectations of masculinity, thus 'feminising' Max. The centrality of his virginity to the narrative also arguably achieves this feminisation. As discussed above in relation to Phoebe in *The Monster Squad*, the term 'virgin' was initially gendered female. In this context, Max's virginity undermines his (sexual) maturity and masculinity, mortifying him whenever the subject is raised. However, Max's

futile pretence at appearing mature actually reveals his true lack of maturity. As suggested by C.S. Lewis,

To be concerned about being grown up, [...] to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood [...]. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness (1966: 25)

This thinking can also apply to becoming truly ‘masculine’, if this is considered the acceptance or valuing of typically ‘feminine’ attributes rather than outright rejection of them. Indeed, Erica Burman explains that, culturally, ‘maturity is equated with masculinity’ due to women and children being associated with each other in their function as ‘others’ to adult men (1995: 54). For Max, qualities of femininity and childishness are chiefly represented by his virginity. His acceptance of this is signalled over the course of the film by his diminishing embarrassment, and finally indifference, whenever his virginity is referenced by another character. Childishness and femininity are also embodied by Dani, who attempts to bring these qualities out in Max by persuading him to take her trick-or-treating, and by bribing him into agreeing to wear tights the following year for a Peter Pan costume. When Dani becomes victimised by the witches towards the end of the film, Max sacrifices himself in her place in a stark contrast to his earlier attitude.

Max’s changing attitude toward the supernatural is also integral to his narrative arc. A belief in or connection with the supernatural is often associated with femininity, in opposition to ‘rational’ masculinity.<sup>8</sup> It is thus significant that in *Hocus Pocus* all of the believers in the supernatural are female characters: Dani, Allison and their teacher (Kathleen

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<sup>8</sup> This association can be seen, for example, in long-held conceptions that the being a medium is a female profession. As summarised by R. Laurence Moore, in the nineteenth century mediums were considered to be ‘weak in the masculine qualities of will and reason and strong in the female qualities of intuition and nervousness’ (1975: 202). This strong association between femininity and a belief in spirituality or the supernatural pervades in contemporary popular depictions of mediums and psychics, such as Patricia Arquette’s character in *Medium* (CBS, 2005-11), Zelda Rubinstein’s in *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) and Whoopi Goldberg’s in *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), as well as in other children’s horror films such as the characters Miss Spink and Miss Forcible in *Coraline*.

Freeman). Max's refusal to believe in the supernatural and his cynicism regarding Halloween, both associated with women and children respectively, can be read as part of his act of maturity and masculinity. This dichotomy of rationality/masculinity and supernatural/femininity allows for *Hocus Pocus* to be read as what Clover calls the 'occult film' (1992: 65). This further illuminates the film's gender politics in relation to the question of address, and speaks to one of this thesis' core aims to highlight the aesthetic, narrative and formal overlaps and distinctions between adult and children's horror films.

Clover identifies the occult film as the most 'female' of horror subgenres as it regularly concerns a female character in the grip of a supernatural force, but behind this female 'cover' is 'the story of a man in crisis' (ibid.). This results in a split between two competing forces that Clover terms 'White Science' and 'Black Magic'. White Science refers to 'Western rational tradition' and is usually represented by white men who are typically doctors. Black Magic refers to Satanism, voodoo and similar practices, and is identified as being represented most commonly by non-white or non-Western women (ibid.: 66). Max, a white male who privileges 'rationality' over the supernatural, is *Hocus Pocus*' White Science representative. Further, while all of the characters are white, eliminating a clear racial divide, Max is from California (a Westerner in the sense of US and global geography) making him an 'other' in Salem (in the East of the US), and his scepticism conflicts with Salem's historical associations with witchcraft. Clover writes that the plot of the occult film hinges upon the White Science representative admitting the supernatural nature of the narrative problem and yielding to the superior Black Magic to solve it (ibid.: 67).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Clover identifies *The Exorcist* as an example, in which a young female, Regan, is possessed by the Devil. When Western medicine fails to cure her, help is enlisted from the White Science representative. This is psychiatrist and ex-priest Dr/Father Karras (Jason Miller). Having previously lost his faith, Karras experiences a spiritual reawakening when he is forced to conclude that an exorcism – a form of 'Black Magic' – is the only way to help Regan.



Max's scepticism of the supernatural causes the Sanderson Sisters to be resurrected when he lights the black-flamed candle, but upon their resurrection he has no choice but to accept the existence of supernatural forces. Regardless, he attempts to use 'scientific' methods to dispatch the witches: first, by using a cigarette lighter to trigger the fire alarm in the Sanderson Sisters' former house, which tricks them into believing that he has magical powers; later by burning the witches in a pottery kiln; and finally, by using the headlamps of a car to trick them into believing it is dawn (upon which they will permanently turn to stone). These methods only temporarily delay the witches, aligning with Clover's observation that 'the inevitable lesson of the modern occult film is that White Science has its limits' and must eventually yield to 'the wisdom of Black Magic' (ibid.: 66). Hence, it is only when Max harnesses the supernatural that the witches are defeated. Max sacrifices his soul to the witches in place of Dani's, an act that he fulfils by drinking the potion that enables his life force to be 'sucked' out by them. This distracts the witches long enough for the sun to rise and turn them to stone. In embracing the 'feminine' supernatural, Max fulfils a role of 'masculinity' – that of heroic protector of a young, vulnerable female. In Clover's terms, Max emerges a 'new man' who 'not only accepts the feminine [...] but even, up to a point, shares it' (ibid.: 99).

Max's arc can be considered an example of the way that films concerning stranger danger address adult anxieties about children, by presenting a particularly reassuring image of the child inside the text 'in order to secure the child who is outside the [text]' (Rose, 1984: 2). It is reassuring in the sense that Max gains a new sense of maturity and responsibility, particularly the responsibility to take care of his younger, more vulnerable sister when his parents are unable to. Although Max's character arc also has the potential to appeal to child viewers who may see him as a role model or peer, this only further fulfils Rose's thesis that children's fiction presents an adult ideal of childhood in order to shape the child reader/viewer into matching it.

Despite Max's embracing of the feminine supernatural, there remains the fact that he uses this in order to defeat the Sanderson Sisters who embody an oppositional form of undesirable, monstrous femininity that threatens to upset the status quo. In this way, *Hocus Pocus* incorporates the pattern of the occult film with attributes that are associated with films of the 'backlash' period, in which women who display characteristics stereotypically associated with feminism – career-driven, power-hungry emasculators who have a disinterest in or hatred of children – are punished for their 'transgressions'. In the context of this chapter's focus on the depictions of 'risky strangers', the witch stands out as a unifying scapegoat of both the anxiety of second-wave feminism disrupting patriarchal dominance and that of child predators and molesters. This association between feminism and child endangerment is particularly egregious given that, far from being the perpetrators of this crime, feminist campaigners were active from as early as the 1970s in working to raise awareness of child sexual abuse, the prevalence of rape culture and toxic masculinity. As discussed by Jenkins, '[f]or feminists, sex crimes occurred not because of abnormalities in pathological individuals', as was previously assumed, but that, 'because of the patriarchal ideologies of the society as a whole', a rapist could be any man (Jenkins, 1998: 136-37). *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, in portraying women who display cartoonishly exaggerated qualities associated with feminism as the predominant perpetrators of child abuse, can therefore be understood as existing within a culture that feared the destabilisation of the patriarchal status quo by feminist discourses.

It therefore seems that Bird's allegation that *The Witches'* sexual references and gender politics prioritise an address to the fears of adult male viewers over those of children is valid in relation to both films. The depiction of witches as women who are at once grotesque, sexually threatening and transgress patriarchal constructs of acceptable womanhood invites a reading of them as embodiments of Creed's 'monstrous feminine', a primarily male fear that imagines 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific,

abject' (1986: 44). In painting certain aspects of femininity as monstrous or unacceptable, it becomes justifiable to repress and control them 'in order to secure and protect the social order' (ibid.: 70). The use of the witch is especially deliberate in this regard, given that throughout history the '[r]hetorical use of the witch has been extremely effective at justifying normative gender roles' (Godwin, 2012: 91). That the negative portrayal of the witch is very common in fairy tales and children's screen media is therefore highly problematic if, as Tatar suggests, the texts we consume as children 'get under our skin in countless ways that do not always register in obvious ways' (2009: 22). Although the negative constructions of unruly and powerful women in *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* are not necessarily addressed to children, the fact is that these are popularly considered to be children's films and are widely viewed by children. It is therefore probable that as a result of watching these films, child viewers are taught to fear and reject the witch-like characteristics of power, sisterhood and spinsterhood and distrust women who possess them, despite the fact that they are valid qualities, pursuits and life choices.

### A Tale of Two Endings

As established in Chapter One, a resolved, hopeful ending is key to the children's horror film. Before concluding this chapter, this brief coda considers the importance of endings to the question of whether children's horror films about stranger danger can be read privileging one audience over another. This discussion focuses on *The Witches* as the end of the film is a departure from that of its source text, making a comparison of the two endings highly productive.

In the film, Miss Irvine appears at Luke's home and returns him to human form, but in the novel the absence of this character means that Luke remains mouse. He is happy about this as his short life expectancy as a mouse means that he, an orphan, will not have to survive

in the world alone after his grandmother's imminent passing. Bird argues that the film's ending suggests that Luke's story 'is not the major concern of the film', as his being turned back into a mouse removes the novel's 'necessary act of wish-fulfilment resolving what is arguably the greatest of childhood fears – namely, separation anxiety' (1998: 120). This point may be true and, in addition, the novel's protagonist remaining a mouse means that he can avoid some of the unappealing aspects of being human: 'Mice don't have to pass exams. Mice don't have to worry about money' (Dahl, 1983: 119). This recalls Chapter Three's discussions of the appeal of being a zombie or a vampire to child viewers. The avoidance of responsibilities holds a clear appeal for child viewers, as does the idea of metamorphosis into a small animal. At the end of the film, Luke-as-mouse traverses his grandmother's house via a series of tubes, toy train sets, vehicles made from Lego and a toy plane. In other words, his diminished size has transformed an ordinary house into a large-scale playground. This lends weight to Bird's argument that, by returning Luke to human form and removing from him the opportunity to remain in a state of eternal childhood play, the film does not privilege the child audience.

Yet the extent to which remaining a child is a childish desire, rather than an adult one, is questionable. Luke's shortened lifespan as a mouse means that he would likely never outgrow childhood, and would remain 'fixed' as a child for the remainder of his short life. As argued in Chapter Three, it is precisely the fact that childhood is *not* a fixed state that might explain why children are often used as a motif of horror in horror films targeted at adults, and children who are *too* unruly become rejected and destroyed by adult figures of authority. Conversely, a fixed child such as Luke-as-mouse is an easily controlled and dependent child, thus retaining the power hierarchy of adults over children. Helping to enforce this hierarchy is that although Luke is 'fixed' he is not monstrous, which differentiates him from the child-vampires discussed in Chapter Three; rather, Luke's mousiness makes him permanently small, vulnerable and cute. More cynically, Luke would also be low-maintenance and low-

cost in terms of care. Adding that Luke is generally well-behaved, he is an ideal child. In relation to the issue of child abuse, it also means that Luke remains within the closely watchful eye of his grandmother. Both this and the fact that he is in the body of a mouse would presumably alleviate adult anxieties of Luke becoming a victim of paedophilia. For Luke to remain a mouse-child does indeed resolve separation anxiety, as Bird claims, but not the separation anxiety of the child. I argue that it resolves the separation anxiety of the adult who cannot stand to see their own child age. This brings us back to the issue of Peter Pan, the most iconic fixed child, and Rose's arguments regarding *Peter Pan*, address, and adult desires.

Of Peter Pan's agelessness, Rose ponders that he is 'a little boy who does not grow up, not because he doesn't want to, but because someone else prefers that he shouldn't' (1984: 3). The 'someone else' being the adult author/reader outside of the text, and the adult parent inside of the text, Mrs Darling, who in the opening of the novel says to her daughter Wendy, "'Oh, why can't you remain like this forever!'" (Barrie, 1911: 13). Of course, by the end of the novel, Wendy makes the choice to leave Neverland and to grow up. For as much as it might seem appealing to children to stay a child forever and avoid adult responsibilities, children also strive for the perceived freedom of adulthood and to be considered older, more mature and more independent than they are. Ebert also alludes to the childish desire to be older in his review of *The Goonies*, quoted above, in his suggestion that seeing child characters 'act a little older than their age' in films is a point of appeal for child viewers (1985). Further, to say to a young child that they are a 'big boy/girl' is usually considered a compliment, congratulation or encouragement. The childish desire to be older is also held by many of the child characters discussed throughout this thesis: Jim in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Max in *Hocus Pocus*, and Dane and DJ in *The Hole* and *Monster House*, who are discussed in the following chapter. It should be noted that in *The Witches'* ending Luke states, 'I really am happy to be a mouse, you know.' However, his subsequent delight at being

restored to human form indicates that rather than being truly happy, he had merely resigned himself to life as a mouse.

Luke's return to human form at the end of the film of *The Witches* can therefore be considered as addressing and fulfilling a childish desire to grow up and, contra to Bird's argument, putting the needs and desires of the child first. The adult desire for children to remain children – whether so that their own children remain sweet and innocent forever, are safe from 'risky strangers' or, in Rose's view, '[hold] off any possible challenge' to adult sexuality (1984: 4) – is a selfish one. As temporarily liberating as Peter Pan's eternal childishness might be, Maria Lassén-Seger calls the desire to remain a child forever a 'regressive wish' (2006: 216), and the fulfilment of this wish in *The Witches* novel a 'symbolic death' that can 'only be understood as a disempowering of the fictive child' (ibid.: 256). David Rees also calls the end of the novel 'untherapeutic' as it implies that even after evil (the witches) has been destroyed, it triumphs (1988: 148). Read in this way, the novel stands in opposition to the notion discussed in the Chapter Two that fairy tales, horror stories and other forms of children's fiction provide children with a 'therapeutic' benefit.

That Luke's transformation back into human form is a positive and empowering development is indicated by the scene's mise-en-scène. When Miss Irvine arrives to transform Luke, he is asleep inside of a doll's house, a prop that neatly establishes his static childhood. As the transformation occurs he rapidly grows in size and breaks out of it, literally outgrowing the enclosure that symbolises his entrapment (Figure 4.20). His naked body then tumbles through the air and he lands on the floor in a crouched position that John Izod reads as foetal (1992: 228) (Figure 4.21). The transformation is thus staged as Luke being reborn as 'healthy and complete boy' who has been given a new chance at life (ibid.). This aligns with Campbell's monomyth, the final stage of which is that the hero is rewarded with the 'freedom to live' (1949: 238). As well as having been physically transformed, Luke is also

psychologically transformed. Claire Bradford argues that metamorphosis in children's fiction can represent a 'desire for stability' (2001: 149): a stability that Luke lost following the trauma of being orphaned. The end of the film resolves this instability and brings the story full circle (aligning, again, with the circularity of Campbell's monomyth) by allowing Luke to transform back into human form, signifying that his grief and psychic instability caused by his parents' deaths has been resolved and that he is capable of surviving for the rest of his life on his own. Although this may be of comfort to adults beset with 'thinking of the children' that to grow up is what is 'best' for Luke, this arguably still puts the needs of the child over those of the adult.

While the prospect of Luke growing up alone is potentially an empowering one, it is of course also very frightening, especially as he is destined to grow up with no living relatives, and probably in the care system. Yet this is of course a children's *horror* film – a subgenre informed as much by the fairy tale as the horror genre, both of which are widely thought to allow viewers to safely face their fears and anxieties and overcome them. The importance of facing one's fears is especially important to the children's horror films discussed in the next chapter.



Figure 4.20: As he transforms, Luke bursts out of the doll's house that served as his home...



Figure 4.21: ...and tumbles onto the floor in a foetal position.

## Conclusion

Engaging with these case studies and the ways in which they display late-twentieth century adult fears of child abuse and female power reveals that the question of address – that is, whose fears and pleasures are at the heart of these texts – is not one with a straightforward answer. For as many times that there are references within these texts that are clearly targeted at adults only, whether to adult sexuality, paedophilia, politics or popular culture, there is a host of fears and pleasures in these films that are addressed to children: the pleasure of transgression felt by watching a film like *The Monster Squad*, through which child viewers can relish in seeing children like themselves swearing, using weapons and making friends with and fighting monsters in equal measure; the pleasure in seeing adult characters made a fool of and children succeed in saving the world where adult authorities cannot; or simply the pleasure of being frightened by grotesque witches and monsters. That this chapters' case studies contain these differing modes of address makes them very standard mass-produced Hollywood products. However, one must also consider the rights of the child viewer over children's media, and in particular the generic context of the children's horror film. While adults are free to view and enjoy all horror films – including those created for children – a majority of horror films exclude children, either by their mode of address, by their adult content and restrictive classifications, or by all of these. Therefore, why should the little horror that does *not* exclude child viewers also spend a great deal of time addressing an adult viewer, who can watch any number of other horror films that are specifically addressed to them?

On the other hand, to consider adult and child audiences as binaries is also arguably simplistic and reductive. Firstly, this overlooks the fact that children's films are often viewed by adults and children together as a family. Secondly, it ignores the likelihood that a child's relationship with a film will evolve as they age. The range of references and subtext addressed to adult viewers in these films might mean little to nothing to most child viewers,



but they can be considered in the same vein as Buckingham's 'comedy-horror' texts that feature child-friendly re-workings of iconic horror monsters (1996: 136). Children's engagement with these might be identified as a process of 'learning the genre', in which wider viewing practices over time will result in the recognition of motifs, characters, tropes and audio-visual language that viewers first encountered in children's horror, and will later see in the adult horror texts from which they originate. A similar process of recognition can also be assumed to be at work with regards to the sexual and political subtext of the children's horror films discussed in this chapter. As child viewers age into adults they might therefore gain additional pleasures from revisiting texts of their childhoods (and possibly sharing them with their own children) and enjoying them from a new perspective, 'getting' the references and subtext that previously eluded them. Far from excluding the child audience, therefore, the elements of children's horror films that are addressed to adults may provide valuable and potentially long-lasting pleasures for young viewers who have relatively little life experience and are just beginning to develop their genre and media literacy.

This form of ongoing, evolving relationship resists the restrictive categorisation of Wall's three modes of address in children's literature, and instead calls for something that acknowledges the fluidity of this relationship. Martha Stoddard Holmes, in response to Rose's work on the 'impossibility' of children's fiction, offers the useful model of a 'spectrum' to describe the way that 'adults and children have different engagements [with children's fiction] throughout their lifetimes, but which they nonetheless share' (2009: 133). Rather than reinforcing the impossibility of children's horror, therefore, this chapter's detailed consideration of address highlights the wealth of *possibilities* that the children's horror film affords viewers of all ages throughout the course of their lives.

One of the outcomes of this chapter is the reveal of problematic representations of gender and sexuality, particularly in the way some children's horror films present

transgressive and powerful women as evil and publishable. The presentation of appropriate and inappropriate masculinity and femininity in children's horror films continues to be a concern in the following and final chapter of this thesis. Here, the discussion shifts focus from outside of the home to inside of it, in the process transforming it from a supposedly safe and comforting space into an 'unhomely' site of terror.

## Chapter Five

### Home Discomforts: the uncanny horror of the home

In contrast to the previous chapter, which took as its focus children's horror films that depict children in danger *outside* of the home and their endangerment by 'risky strangers', this chapter considers children's horror films in which children are endangered *inside* the home and, in two of these case studies, by supernatural entities that take on the forms of their own parents: *Monster House* (Kenan, 2006), *Coraline* (Selick, 2009) and *The Hole* (Dante, 2009).

The home has been a paradigmatic space for cinema throughout its history, which is unsurprising given that the home is considered a space of security and comfort for people of all ages. For children especially, who have yet to learn independence and rely on the protection of parents or guardians, that the home could become a space of horror and danger has the potential to be particularly frightening. While the case studies of the previous chapter were produced in the late-1980s and early-1990s and are argued to resonate with contemporaneous concern for children's welfare outside of the home, the case studies of this chapter were produced after the millennium. As such, they can be read as supporting Furedi's argument that the 'culture of fear' has by the twenty-first century become so oppressive that 'the outside world [...] has become a no-go area' for children, and that not even the home is an entirely safe space (2006: xix). However, while this context is illuminating, this chapter's argument moves away from the previous chapter's method of drawing connections between children's horror films and their socio-historical contexts. This chapter's primary method is again close textual analysis, but is also framed by considering the integral link between the home and the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny in order to unpack how these films address child-like fears of growing up and forming an identity and

existence independent of one's parents. This discussion also applies and builds upon scholarly readings of the home as an uncanny and threatening space in adult horror subgenres such as the slasher and haunted house film. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which children's horror films set in the home adopt formal and aesthetic strategies of these adult horror subgenres in order to elicit fear while maintaining an address to child viewers.

Wood notes that a remark at the end of a film concerning home (e.g. 'Let's go home') is an 'obstinately recurring motif of the American cinema' (2003: 18). One of the most iconic and enduring cinematic examples of this is Dorothy (Judy Garland) tapping her ruby slippers together and repeating 'There's no place like home' near the conclusion of *The Wizard of Oz*. While not a horror film, *The Wizard of Oz* contains elements which can be considered frightening for a child audience, such as the Wicked Witch of the West and her flying monkeys. Similarly to the child protagonists in the texts to be discussed in this chapter, Dorothy must endure these and other horrors before being rewarded with the return to the safety of her home and family. While the ending of this film appears to prescribe the moral that 'home' is a haven that is superior to 'away', Salman Rushdie disagrees. He suggests that Dorothy's longing as she sings 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' in the film's first act is much more powerful than her later longing to be returned home: 'In its most potent emotional moment this is unarguably a film about the joys of going away' (1992: 24). Rushdie's argument is strengthened by his analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of Dorothy's Kansas, which is characterised by drab, grey-brown cinematography and 'geometrical simplicity' of uncomplicated shapes and straight lines, revealing why it is both a place of safety and comfort as well as one which is uninteresting and from which one would wish to escape (*ibid.*: 22) (Figure 5.1). This is in contrast to the fantastical world of Oz, where its heightened colours reflect its status as an escapist fantasy, but also where danger and evil are

represented by imagery that is ‘invariably twisty, irregular, and misshapen’ (ibid.) (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.1: The ‘geometrical simplicity’ and drab cinematography of Dorothy’s Kansas home in *The Wizard of Oz*.



Figure 5.2: The bright colours and twisty, irregular shapes of Oz mark it as both escapist and dangerous in Rushdie’s reading of the film.

This reading of *The Wizard of Oz* is illustrative of the way that the concept of the home holds an ambiguous position in film, depicted as a sanctum to which protagonists return after a thrilling adventure as often as it is represented as a site of unrest, tedium, and even danger. The home is especially represented in this paradoxical way in the horror genre, where ‘the ease with which the home can slide from comfort zone to a site of anxiety suggests that these oppositional qualities are in fact related to each other’ (Ng, 2016: 152). This invites a reading of the home as an uncanny space. The overt connection between the home and the uncanny comes from the term’s literal meaning being ‘unhomely’, implying feelings of discomfort and unfamiliarity that are at odds with traditional conceptions of the home. The connection between the unfamiliarity of the home and the uncanny is present in the work of Ernst Jentsch. Paraphrased by Freud, for Jentsch the uncanny is an ‘area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny’ (1919: 125). This is applicable to this chapter’s case studies, two of which feature children who have moved into new, unfamiliar houses and feel displaced as a result. However, Freud reasons that ‘not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening’ and that the uncanny does not simply refer to fear caused by unfamiliarity, but is the clashing of the familiar and unfamiliar at once; or ‘that

species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (ibid.: 124-25). The manifestation of the uncanny in the horror genre is thus frequently in *familiar* objects or people behaving in *unfamiliar* ways, resulting in an eerie, unsettling or frightening atmosphere. This is described by Barry Curtis with particular reference to the use of the home as an uncanny setting in horror:

One of the features of the haunted house film is the uncanny animation of the house and its interiors; the flexing of margins and the refusal of objects to stay stored in place or within the limits of their customary significance. The structure itself is prone to metamorphosis and agitation (2008: 11)

Terry Castle's report of the uncanny as an 'obsessional inventory of eerie fantasies, motifs, and effects' lists some of the uncanny things that might be found within the type of haunted house that Curtis describes, many of which also appear in this chapter's case studies:

Doubles, dancing dolls and automata, waxwork figures, alter egos and 'mirror' selves, spectral emanations, detached body parts [...], the ghastly fantasy of being buried alive, omens, precognitions, déjà vu (1995: 4-5)

Castle goes on to say that what makes these phenomena uncanny is 'the way they subvert the distinction between the real and the phantasmic – plunging us instantly, and vertiginously, into the hag-ridden realm of the unconscious' (ibid.). This alludes to the connection between the uncanny and another psychoanalytic concept, the 'return of the repressed': the rise to the surface of material, such as memories or feelings, that have been forgotten or repressed in the depths of the mind. It is in this material – that is both familiar and unfamiliar – returning to the subject's conscious mind that can result in feelings of uncanniness, and which we see play out in this chapter's case studies.

The uncanny and the return of the repressed are integral to Elisabeth Bronfen's work on the home in cinema. She works from Freud's 'insistence that the subject is split between psychic material consciously available to it and repressed material to which it has no direct

access', resulting in the uncanny and disquieting sense that, quoting Kristeva, "the ego is not even master in its own house" (2004: 22). With regards to the concept of the home in cinema, Bronfen argues that Hollywood films address the psychic need for 'stories about the successful achievement of a sense of being at home' while also acknowledging that a repressed, unconscious sense of 'dislocation' prevails (ibid.: 21). With this in mind, Bronfen unites the feeling that the ego is not 'master in its own house' with the concrete experience and fear of a loss of one's home, resulting in the sense of literally not feeling 'master of one's own house' (ibid.: 22). This work applies to this chapter and the films under discussion where child protagonists encounter repressed memories and feelings, and which spurs in them uncanny feelings of discomfort and 'homelessness' in their own homes. It is in confronting the repressed that these feelings of dislocation are vanquished, allowing them to feel 'at home', both metaphorically and literally.

One crucial aspect of Bronfen's work is the idea that there is a connection between filmic homes and the psyches of the characters who inhabit them. Jon C. Scott and Christina Doyle Francis make a similar proposal in relation to the concept of home in children's literature. They note that, while children's stories can take place in any setting, 'they all can be categorized in terms of the relationship of the main character to two places: "home" and "not home"' (1993: 223). The concept of 'home' (whether a physical place or a state of mind) is 'a place of comfort, security, and acceptance', while 'not home' is where these needs are not met. Uniting the work of Bronfen and Scott and Doyle Francis is, therefore, the notion that the home 'is not merely a dwelling place but also an attitude' (ibid.).

Useful to this chapter is the work of Mary Ann Doane on the Gothic paranoid woman's film cycle of the 1940s. Although it does not focus on children or children's films, it is an example of how a group of films which present the home as an uncanny space can be read in terms of how they reflect the contemporaneous concerns of their target audience.

Doane's work is particularly useful in this regard as the films of her focus (e.g. *Rebecca* [Hitchcock, 1940] and *Gaslight* [Cukor, 1944]) share many thematic elements with horror films for children, but concern situations which have more resonance for adult female audiences. For example, 1940s woman's Gothic films often feature scenarios 'in which the wife invariably fears that her husband is planning to kill her' (Doane, 1987: 123). Children's horror films concerning the home similarly feature ambiguity concerning the intentions of familial figures. One particularly useful aspect of Doane's work is her exploration of how certain motifs and elements of *mise-en-scène* in the 1940s woman's Gothic film are used to reflect the entrapment or objectification of female protagonists, such as through the repeated uses of staircases, doors and windows as 'frames' (ibid.: 135-38). Similar imagery is explored below in relation to the children's horror film. With regards to their social context, Doane argues that the theme of the malevolent husband is especially resonant in the 1940s woman's Gothic film: the war-time context of the enlistment of young men into the army meant that producers assumed a predominantly female audience, and as a result 'there is an intensity and an aberrant quality in [these] films which is linked to the ideological upheaval signalled by a redefinition of sexual roles and the reorganization of the family during the war years' (ibid.: 4). This subgenre therefore deals with timely issues relating to women and domesticity, particularly 'women's fears about losing their unprecedented freedoms *and* being forced back into [their] homes' after the end of the war (Modleski, 1982: 12). We can also argue that the use of domestic settings in children's horror resonates with an assumed child audience because children, who are yet to learn independence, are still reliant on the support and the protection of the domestic space and parental figures. The threat of the loss of the home, which is intimately bound together with the concept of family, is therefore frequently exploited in horror films addressed to children.

The connection between the fear of loss of the home and family can be thought to resonate particularly strongly with late-twentieth and twenty-first century children in



Western culture due to increasing deviations from the 'norm' of the nuclear family structure and gender roles, as discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter. While the intention is not to imply that alternative family structures (such as families with divorced or separated parents) are *bad*, it is acknowledged that they have the *potential* to cause unsettling feelings in children, especially concerning the stability of the home and the family. Given the similarities between fairy tales and children's horror films, as discussed in Chapter Two, the frightening prospect of parental separation can be considered a modern-day equivalent to the somewhat outmoded trope in fairy tales of the death or absence of one or both parents. A further link between fairy tales and children's horror films concerning the home and family is that fairy tales frequently feature a malevolent parent, step-parent, or parent-in-law. Reynolds proposes that children's stories 'in which parents destroy their own children' are potentially the most frightening, particularly due to 'what they imply about the threat to children from parents, adults, and official institutions than from any elaborate bogeymen and monsters' (2007: 312). While in the case studies of the previous two chapters, adults who are unrelated to the child protagonists pose a significant threat, in two of this chapter's case studies – *Coraline* and *The Hole* – it is the parents themselves (or rather, supernatural manifestations of the parents) who are 'the real ogres' of these children's lives (Tatar, 1992: 191).

As discussed above in relation to Bronfen's work, in narratives concerning the home the attitudes of a character towards their home and family, and the (in)stability of these, are very often reflected in their subjectivity. Dale Bailey similarly notes that an unstable home is often a metaphor in fiction for 'the fragmented personality of its owner' (1999: 114). A very literal example of this reading is Slavoj Žižek's analysis of *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) – a film that, like *Coraline* and *The Hole*, depicts a troubled relationship between a parent and child. In the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes, 2006) Žižek argues that the three levels of the Bates house 'reproduce the three levels of human subjectivity', and thus

the levels of the psyche of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), who kills his mother and adopts her identity. According to Žižek, the ground floor represents the ego where Norman behaves normally. The first floor represents the superego, where Norman imagines his mother still resides, has imaginary conversations with her and allows her personality to dominate his own. Finally, Žižek identifies the basement, where Norman hides his mother's corpse, as the id, 'the reservoir of his illicit drives'. This method of breaking down specific rooms or levels of the home and reading them as representations of the psyche is applied below to some of this chapter's case studies. Speaking less literally, this mirroring between the home and the subjectivity of its inhabitant is applicable to the children in *Coraline*, *The Hole* and *Monster House* due to their being in transitional states in both age and location.

In terms of age, *Coraline's* eponymous protagonist (Dakota Fanning) and *Monster House's* DJ (Mitchel Musso) are children on the cusp of puberty, while *The Hole's* Dane (Chris Massoglia) is a teenager of roughly sixteen- or seventeen-years-old transitioning into adulthood. Each protagonist finds themselves situated liminally between either multiple homes or multiple versions of one home. *Coraline* and *Dane's* narratives begin when they each move into a new, unfamiliar and unsatisfactory home.<sup>1</sup>

*Coraline*, who feels bored and neglected by her parents, finds in her new home a door to a near-identical, but far more appealing version of her house, containing near-identical, but far more appealing versions of her parents, known as Other Mother and Other Father (Teri Hatcher and John Hodgman), who each have shiny black buttons in the place of eyes. *Coraline* is initially seduced by the Other home, but becomes disillusioned when she learns that in order to stay she must exchange her eyes for buttons. She discovers that the

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<sup>1</sup> Moving into a new home is a fairly common event to initiate the narratives of children's horror films, demonstrating that it is (or at least, is assumed to be) a distressing life event for children. Other films that begin this way are *The Little Vampire*, *Hocus Pocus*, *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Little Monsters*. However, the home itself or the child protagonist's relationship to it is not as prominent a concern in these films in comparison to the films discussed in this chapter.

Other home is a ruse created by the evil Other Mother in order to devour Coraline's soul. To return to normality, Coraline must reject and defeat Other Mother and accept her real home and parents. *The Hole's* Dane has moved several times with his mother, Susan (Teri Polo), and younger brother, Lucas (Nathan Gamble) to avoid their abusive family patriarch who is currently in jail. With their neighbour, teenaged girl Julie (Haley Bennett), Dane and Lucas discover a bottomless hole in their basement, out of which their worst, repressed fears begin to emerge. Lucas, who is afraid of clowns, is plagued by an animated clown doll, and Julie is haunted by her guilt for not being able to save her childhood best friend from falling to her death from an abandoned rollercoaster years before. The primary concern of the film is Dane's fear of his abusive father, who he fears he will grow up to become. This fear is associated with the family home in which the abuse occurred. In the climax of the film Dane enters a nightmarish version of this home that lurks inside of the hole, where he must confront and defeat his fear of his father, in so doing sealing the hole. *Monster House's* DJ, by contrast, has not moved into a new home, but can be considered 'between' homes due to his fascination with a mysterious house opposite his own that he suspects to be sentient. He and his friends, Chowder (Sam Lerner) and Jenny (Spencer Locke), discover that the house is possessed by the vengeful spirit of a woman named Constance (Kathleen Turner), the deceased wife of the house's sole occupant, Mr Nebbercracker (Steve Buscemi).

In facing and overcoming the obstacles presented by their liminal states of being – their ages and their splitting between multiple uncanny 'homes' – each protagonist emerges with a better grasp of their identity, fears and desires, erasing the sense of what Bronfen calls 'psychic dislocation' (2004: 22). Thus, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the home is frequently used in children's horror as a setting with which to address and explore interconnected childhood concerns regarding the (in)stability of the home, the family and identity.

This chapter will also refer, where appropriate, to these films' uses of stereoscopic 3D. Although it is now very common for children's, family and animated films to be released in 3D, it is significant that *Monster House*, *Coraline* and *The Hole* were produced and theatrically projected in 3D *before* the mainstream resurgence of the format that is widely attributed to *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009). That these films were conceived, produced and widely screened using 3D technology can therefore be interpreted as deliberate creative decisions appropriate to the films' themes and settings, rather than commercially-minded attempts of studios to tap into the current vogue. As scholars of 3D cinema have highlighted (e.g. Higgins, 2012; Weetch, 2012 and 2013) the ability of 3D to manipulate filmic space – either giving the impression that it extends into the screen (positive parallax) which creates the illusion of depth, or contracts, pushing objects out into the audience space (negative parallax) – means that it 'can be deployed – or at least read – in a manner that contributes to meaning construction' (Weetch, 2012: 21). Given the importance of the space of the home in *Monster House*, *Coraline* and *The Hole*, their uses of 3D are read in relation to how it contributes to the narrative and thematic elements of each film.

### 'Anytown, USA': the mundane home and the slasher aesthetic

As noted by Curtis, quoted above, the manifestation of the uncanny in the cinematic home is frequently presented through the 'misbehaviour' of these homes, their inhabitants and contents. Also relating to the uncanny, Curtis argues that the 'house is at its most mysterious when it is most familiar' (2008: 11); this indicates that a house can be considered uncanny even when its inhabitants and contents are behaving entirely as expected, and is just as pertinent to the presentations of the home in *Coraline*, *The Hole* and *Monster House* as their 'fantastic' manifestations of the uncanny.

The familiarity and mundanity of the 'ordinary' homes in these films bears a close relation to the slasher film. *The Hole's* director Joe Dante insists that it is 'not a slasher movie' because 'it's supposed to be something you can take your kids to' (in Mottram, 2010: 25). Although the slasher subgenre is associated with adult content typically considered unsuitable for children, like sex and violence, it holds a lot in common with the children's horror film due to its tendency to tell stories from the points of view of teenagers/young adults with agency and independence, and reveal the ineffectuality of their parents and other authority figures. The slasher subgenre also resonates with the texts discussed in this chapter due to its narratives often taking place in or around the home and suburban communities, with particular concern about the invasion of these by an outside force, thus dismantling their perceived safety. The slasher and the children's horror films discussed here also share several aesthetic and formal strategies, especially with regards to the ways the home and suburban community are presented, which are attended to in detail below. As such, the slasher provides a useful point of comparison for the ways in which children's horror films address children's concerns about the home.

In discussing slasher films such as *Halloween*, Dika notes that they are 'usually positioned in a middle-class American setting, one that fosters the greatest degree of "likeness" to the members of the film-viewing audience or, at least, their mythical ideal' (1990: 58-59). This closeness between the films' settings and the homes (or ideal homes) of the audience evokes the form of the uncanny offered by Curtis – a house being 'most mysterious when it is most familiar' (2008: 11) – thus potentially increasing the horror and discomfort of the audience who might imagine that very similar scenarios could occur in their own homes or neighbourhoods. Dika argues that this proximity to the audience's own life is 'aided by the fact that the settings are never identified as actual American locations. In this way, the settings and the community can be abstracted and made almost resonant in their isolation' (1990: 59). Dika appropriately nicknames this real-but-mythical setting 'Anytown,

U.S.A.' (ibid.: 35). Similarly, *The Hole* and *Monster House* (and *Coraline*, to a lesser extent) take place in seemingly ordinary homes in seemingly ordinary suburban neighbourhoods. We can presume that these are designed to bear a close degree of likeness to the homes and neighbourhoods of the model child viewer in order to make the fears that are addressed within these cinematic homes have a greater impact upon the intended audience.

The haunted house film is, of course, another horror subgenre that takes advantage of the setting of the home as a site of familiarity in order to elicit anxiety, as explored by Bailey (1999: 47-66). Using *The Amityville Horror* (Rosenberg, 1979) as a case study, Bailey observes that most haunted house narratives follow a formula in which a middle-class nuclear family (or family surrogate), who are sceptical of the supernatural, move into a new house. This house would normally exceed the financial resources of the family, but due to an unsavoury history (such as the house having been the site of gruesome murders) the family can afford it. This rise in social mobility despite one's financial situation can be read as tapping into the American Dream. However, their financial luck becomes undone by the increasingly malevolent supernatural attacks which the house seems to inflict upon the family, exploiting what Bailey terms 'economic horror': they are unable to leave the house for fear of homelessness, nor remain in the house for fear of death. Bailey argues that the audience may relate to the 'ordinariness' of the family and the 'dream' of financial and familial comfort and success that the house represents. For this dream to come crashing down, these narratives force the audience to reflect upon their own financial instability, and by extension the uncertainty and instability of the American Dream, or rather, the 'American Nightmare' (Bailey, 1999). Children are typically assumed to have less awareness of financial matters than adults, but the prospect of homelessness or an unstable home still has the potential to resonate with child viewers. Though the issues bound up in the American Dream may not have much relevance or interest to child viewers, texts which make reference to the concerns, desires and fears of adults, however obliquely, nonetheless present child viewers

with images of what they might *expect* adulthood to be like, and how they should construct their own adulthoods as they age. Therefore, following from the previous chapter's discussion of the problematic presentation of women as monstrous and transgressive beings, this chapter also considers the presentation of adult characters in these films with regards to the examples of adulthood they offer to both the child characters and child audience of address.

In light of the overlaps between children's horror films and adult-oriented horror subgenres with domestic settings, it is useful to consider the openings of *Monster House*, *The Hole* and *Coraline* in order to examine how they present the 'ordinary' homes at the centres of their narratives, and to what effect. *Monster House* goes to the greatest lengths to establish a tone of perceived 'normality', safety and peacefulness in its depiction of the neighbourhood where a majority of the narrative takes place, while also acknowledging the possibility of danger. In so doing, *Monster House* is highly reminiscent of *Halloween*. *Halloween's* simple but effective opening credits show bright orange text on a black background, accompanied by a carved pumpkin on the left side of the frame. As the credits roll the camera tracks closer to the pumpkin, until, by the end of the credits, the pumpkin takes up half of the frame (Figure 5.3). This, combined with the score of sharp, high-pitched piano notes underscored by a deep baseline, serves to create a mood of dread and 'introduce the possibility of evil that lurks within' the holiday of Halloween that is commonly associated with childhood fun (Dika, 1990: 34). Further blurring this boundary between childhood innocence and sinister evil, the score is drowned out by the singing of children as the credits segue into the opening scene in which the film's stalker and antagonist, six-year-old Michael Myers (Will Sandin), approaches his ordinary middle-class family home and gazes at his sister (Sandy Johnson) through the windows before entering the house and murdering her. The sequence is conveyed through a prolonged subjective shot, characteristic of the slasher, that represents Michael's voyeuristic point-of-view.

*Monster House's* opening credits similarly evoke dread and foreboding through simplicity by showing the title in red text on a black background accompanied by a score of frenetic high-pitched strings and low trumpets. As with the pumpkin in *Halloween*, the camera tracks closer to the title text until it dominates the frame, hinting towards the powerful and overbearing nature of the actual monster house (Figure 5.4). The film then cuts abruptly, simultaneous to the halt of the score, to a scene of a starkly different nature in which a little girl (Ryan Newman) happily rides a tricycle through a middle-class suburban neighbourhood. As in *Halloween*, the juxtaposition of the ominous opening credits with the apparent normalcy of the opening scene's setting and conveyance of childhood innocence is unsettling, however *Monster House* achieves this effect slightly differently. In the opening sequence a sweeping long take (contrasting with the unsteady point-of-view shot of *Halloween*) follows an Autumn leaf being gently blown around by the wind – conveying a peaceful sense of flying or floating – in a neighbourhood populated by almost identical-looking detached houses. When the leaf lands on the pavement it is run over by the aforementioned little girl riding a tricycle, whereupon the camera – continuing the fluid long take – takes her as its new subject of interest. As she cycles along the girl sings a tuneless melody, her apparent carefree attitude and lack of adult supervision giving the impression that the neighbourhood is safe, an idea which is furthered by the soundtrack of delicate woodwind instruments which complement the girl's voice and allude to her sweetness and innocence. The girl takes intermittent breaks from her singing to greet the inanimate objects she passes. The first – 'Hello, fence!' – brings our attention to the white picket fences of many of the neighbourhood's properties. In US popular culture the white picket fence has become a motif of comfortable middle-class suburban living and, by extension, the American Dream. However, over time it has become more commonly considered a cliché than a sincere representation of this lifestyle, and as such has been utilised many times in American popular culture in order to undercut and/or satirise the notion of suburban tranquillity (e.g. in *Blue*



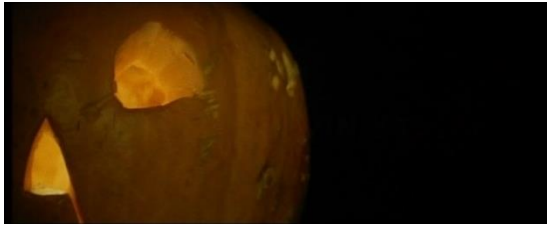


Figure 5.3: The opening credits sequence of Halloween.



Figure 5.4: The opening credits sequence of Monster House.



Figure 5.5: The foreboding and decrepit monster house.



Figure 5.6: The point-of-view shot of killer Michael Myers in the opening of Halloween.



Figure 5.7: DJ's home of middle-class suburban affluence.



Figure 5.8: Dane's new home in The Hole – as comforting as it is mundane.

*Velvet* [Lynch, 1986] and *Gremlins*). The inclusion of white picket fences in the opening of *Monster House* can therefore be considered not simply a signifier of the supposed safe and generic nature of the neighbourhood, but also a deliberate hint toward oncoming danger or unrest. This is further achieved through the little girl's singing, which, while conveying her relaxation and joy, is also reminiscent of the childlike singing in the opening scene of *Halloween* and of horror soundtracks, such as *Rosemary's Baby*, which use the juxtaposition of childlike singing with the horror context to evoke feelings of unease. Whether actual child viewers will 'get' these intertextual references is highly questionable, again causing us to ask who these films are actually addressing. Nevertheless, this sequence establishes a false sense of security that suggests that something sinister lurks beneath the surface of tranquillity and childhood innocence. By extension, this also alludes to the unacknowledged psychic unrest of its child protagonist and which will be resolved by the narrative's end.

The lurking of hidden danger becomes more apparent in the second half of the sequence. The little girl stops abruptly when her tricycle's front wheel catches on something, but the camera, still in its fluid long take, continues to move along the street, tracing the path the little girl is expected to be following, until the camera 'realises' it has left the girl behind and halts. Simultaneously, the lilting soundtrack peters out, leaving only the eerie sound of the wind. The leaf blows back into frame, whereupon it, too, seems to 'realise' the abrupt change in tone, and, followed by the camera, blows back in the direction of the little girl, who is now stuck on the front lawn of a house and muttering 'la-la-la' disconcertedly and monotonously as she struggles to resume cycling. One and a half minutes into the sequence, it cuts for the first time in order to show the once free-flowing leaf become trapped between the spokes of the tricycle. Where the leaf previously signified the tranquillity and joy of the girl, as well as the safety of the neighbourhood, it now represents the abrupt shift in tone to one of unease and potential threat. It continues in this vein, as the leaf comes free and blows toward the house. This first clear shot of the house is accompanied still by the sound of the

blowing wind, as well as, in opposition to the harmonious music associated with the girl, deep brass notes and creaking noises emitting from the house itself. The camera tracks forward at a low angle towards the house, foreboding that this is the titular house which will later terrorise the child characters (Figure 5.5). Once again, this is reminiscent of *Halloween's* opening scene in which Michael's point-of-view shot takes us closer to the house in which he will commit a gruesome murder (Figure 5.6).

At a glance, the titular monster house does not look particularly out of the ordinary – it is a house which could easily be seen on any average suburban street, thus establishing it as an 'uncannily' familiar house, and recalling Dika's assertion that slasher films tend to have settings which '[foster] the greatest degree of "likeness" to the members of the film-viewing audience' (1990: 58-59). However, its sinister nature is suggested by the 'Beware!' signs in the garden, its shabby appearance (missing roof tiles, peeling paint), its dull, grey-brown colouring, and that the trees around the edge of the property are completely barren of leaves, unlike the other trees in the neighbourhood. This decayed appearance is typical of the trope of the haunted house, which Curtis writes 'is identified as a troubled place, marked by neglect, strange habits and failed rituals of order and maintenance' (2008: 31). The house may be read as representing the result of the American Dream 'gone wrong': stagnated, rotten and failed. The tension of the sequence reaches a climax when the front door rattles ominously and the door swings open to reveal deep blackness inside, punctuated only by two eyes staring out. The tension is finally broken when the figure to whom the eyes belong, Mr Nebbercracker, the curmudgeonly, old occupant of the house, emerges and yells 'Get off my lawn!' and chases the little girl off the property. The film thus builds expectations of something sinister occurring in the house, only to subvert them, or rather, delay the reveal of the house's mystery until later in the narrative.

As this sequence segues into the next we can compare the appearance of the monster house to a 'normal' house on the street: that of DJ, the protagonist who lives opposite with his parents (Catherine O'Hara and Fred Willard), and has observed the interaction between the little girl and Nebbercracker through his telescope. DJ's home is structurally very similar to the monster house, which is of course one of the ways the monster house is all the more frightening and uncanny – that is, they are both typical detached two-storey houses in a reasonably affluent middle-class neighbourhood. However, in contrast to the monster house, DJ's home is painted white with blue window shutters, trellises, window boxes full of flowers and is otherwise very well-kept (Figure 5.7). We are also granted views of the inside of DJ's house, showing that it is well-lit, brightly coloured, and otherwise very 'homely'. In these very brief opening moments, the film has made effective and efficient use of slasher techniques in order to establish these two homes as binary opposites while also making clear their uncanny closeness – both physically and aesthetically – and the unsettling idea that not everything is as it seems, with secrets lurking (literally) behind closed doors. In being presented through the perspectives of two child characters – the little girl and DJ – the opening sequence of *Monster House* conveys an address firmly to children rather than adults, the typical audience of the slasher. Thus, these similarities between *Monster House* and adult horror films further demonstrate that, despite their very different audiences, they often employ very similar strategies to address their viewers and their potential fears.

The early establishing shots of the two contrasting homes in *Monster House* is not only integral to the film's tone and narrative, but also to the journey of DJ, the film's pre-teen hero. Relating to the above references to child characters being in liminal states in terms of age and location, Wheatley, discussing the significance of the family home in Gothic children's television, writes that 'the adolescent is figured as uncanny, existing between the categories of child and adult and trapped in the interstices of the family home, literally in-

between its structures' (2012: 389). DJ is likewise 'in-between' the two binary homes: while physically inside of one, his family home, he is mentally fixated on another, the monster house, and with unravelling its mysteries. Wheatley further suggests that childhood is figured as 'prison-like, as something [...] to be escaped' (ibid.). In this context, DJ's obsession with the monster house and his situation between the two homes can be read as reflecting not just his interstitial status as an adolescent, but also a desire to break out of the 'prison' of his family home and from the rule of his parents, who near the start of the film nag him, chide him for spying on the neighbours, and tease him about being on the onset of puberty. The latter is prompted by DJ's voice breaking when he insists 'I'm serious!' about there being something wrong with Nebbercracker's house. He then corrects himself by repeating 'I'm serious' in as deep and masculine a voice he can muster, revealing that his aspirations to break away from his home, his family, and out of childhood are intimately connected with a desire for particularly masculine conceptions of adulthood and independence. As will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, this link between the home and the masculine (and how this is configured with its opposite, the feminine) is integral to the narrative of *Monster House* and the arc of its central character.

*The Hole's* opening employs similar tactics to *Monster House* and the slasher to establish its domestic setting as peaceful and safe while suggesting something more sinister lurking beneath the surface of this image, and of the psyche of its protagonist. It opens with a long shot which seems to be travelling backwards through the titular hole from which, later in the film, the child characters' worst fears will come to life. This opening shot precludes the ominous nature of the hole by destabilising the viewer and evoking disorientation and unease from the outset. It is then revealed that the 'hole' was in fact the inside of the exhaust pipe of a car, adding to the film a sense that things are not necessarily as they seem. The camera pulls back further to show the car travelling down a pleasant suburban street which is remarkably similar to DJ's in *Monster House*, flanked on either side by trees, grass, and

archetypal middle-class houses; another example of Dika's 'Anytown, U.S.A.' Again, like DJ's home, the 'ordinary' home in *The Hole* is a two-storey detached house with a welcoming brown and beige colour palette (Figure 5.8). The use of 3D is extremely effective for the shots of the house's interior. Best described as 'naturalistic' in style, the 3D gives the impression of depth and space, to imitate the feeling of actually being in the house and making it feel open and welcoming. However, this naturalistic quality, which makes the house seem 'uncannily' real, might also have the effect of making the strange things that later occur inside the house all the more frightening. As the car pulls into the driveway and the family unit of Dane, Lucas and Susan emerge, the soundtrack begins with a melodic tune of softly sweeping strings in order underscore that this home represents a haven of comfort and security. To this family it is even more significant as they have moved several times in order to avoid their abusive father/husband, Mr Thompson. They assume each house will be their final and 'true' home, but, thus far, this has not been the case. This house therefore holds for the family yet another promise of a fresh start, a place that they might finally call their true and permanent home.

For jaded teenager Dane, the new house does not hold this promise: rather, the idealistic establishing shots of the house are undercut by the film's first line of dialogue, uttered by Dane as he emerges from the car: 'This stinks', followed by his unimpressed gaze over the neighbourhood and his complaint that he is 2000 miles away from his friends. For Dane, the 'ordinariness' of the new abode does not represent comfort or homeliness, but rather adds to his dissatisfaction. Rushdie's analysis of *The Wizard of Oz's* Kansas scenes can be recalled here, in that the simplicity and muted colour palette of the neighbourhood of *The Hole* reveals it as paradoxically 'a place of safety and comfort as well as one which is uninteresting and from which one would wish to escape' (1992: 22). Dane is also in an interstitial state of adolescence, torn between being a dependent child and a responsible adult, and is not just stuck between two homes, but between the many different homes in

which he has lived in throughout his life. The sense of 'psychic dislocation' from one's home that Bronfen describes, as well as both the mental and physical 'interstitial' nature of children in Gothic television highlighted by Wheatley, are therefore highly applicable to Dane's situation.

Curtis writes that '[a]ll houses are haunted – by memories, by the history of their sites, by their owners' fantasies and projections' (2008: 34), a statement that applies to all of the homes discussed in this chapter. The monster house is haunted – literally – by Constance's spirit, by Nebbercracker's memories of their short but happy marriage, and by the traumatic circumstances of her death which occurred on that very site. In *Coraline* the house is 'haunted' by Coraline's fantasies and desires for better parents and by the overbearing presence of Other Mother. In *The Hole* Dane is 'haunted' by the memories of his original childhood home and the abuse that occurred there. This repressed memory in turn 'haunts' his new home. As these repressed feelings are associated with a negative portrait of fatherhood, Dane's arc, like DJ's, is similarly centred on not only his attitude towards this new house and his (in)ability to consider it his 'home', but on particularly (hyper-)masculine and patriarchal conceptions of adulthood and its relation to the family home. It is only when Dane has the courage to face his repressed fear head-on that it is vanquished. Thus, when Curtis writes that the haunted house in film is 'an established scenario for childhood fears, tentative new beginnings, dramas of inheritance and the return of the repressed' (2008: 31), this is highly relevant to Dane – more than any other character discussed in this chapter – and his narrative arc in *The Hole*.

Like Dane, the eponymous protagonist of *Coraline* feels resentment towards her new living conditions, having moved into a new house as a result of her parents' jobs. Due to a combination of her unhappiness at being forced to move to a location thousands of miles away from her friends, and at feeling ignored by her busy parents, Coraline is lonely, bored

and suffers a sense of displacement. Referring to Neil Gaiman's novel upon which the film is based, Clare Bradford et al point out that 'even though [Coraline] remains at home throughout the story', 'a feeling of homelessness' is created (2008: 148). Through *mise-en-scène*, the film is able to replicate this feeling and simultaneously reflect the protagonist's unrest and dissatisfaction. This aligns with Curtis' claim that in the haunted house film there is 'a particularly intense relationship between narrative and *mise-en-scène*' (2008: 11). The presentation of the house where the majority of the film is set is largely different to the family homes in *Monster House* and *The Hole*. Instead of the warm-but-dull colouring of the environments and the generic 'cookie-cutter' houses of those films, reflecting the nature of those homes as 'both enriching and stifling, a sanctuary and a prison' (Alston, 2008: 69), Coraline's new home, which is an apartment in an old, large house named the Pink Palace, is an unpleasant shade of sickly pale pink which the grey sky does little to improve (Figure 5.9). While the homes in *The Hole* and *Monster House* are more in line with Dika's descriptions of the house in the slasher, the Pink Palace has more in common with Bailey's haunted house trope: 'it must be old, it must be large, it must have a troubled history', all of which is gradually revealed to be true for the Pink Palace (1999: 57). The house's name, like *The Amityville Horror*'s 'High Hopes', is also at once accurate and so overtly innocuous as to suggest that it is hiding something sinister (*ibid.*).

The interior of the Pink Palace is just as unappealing as its exterior, with grey, dull blue and off-white colouring. Coraline herself, perhaps in an attempt to assert her own identity in this unfamiliar place, provides the only bright spot in a world of grey with her blue hair, blue nail polish, yellow raincoat and pink jumper. Unlike *The Hole*, 3D is employed inside of the home not to open up the space in a pleasant way, but to contract it by bringing objects out into negative parallax. As put by *Coraline*'s cinematographer, this 'crowding' of objects into the audience space 'invoke[s] claustrophobia or discomfort' (Kozachik, 2009). The outdoor environment of Coraline's world, meanwhile, is not an affluent suburban



neighbourhood (like *The Hole* and *Monster House*), but what appears to be an isolated, rural area. The house is surrounded by a vast but grey and barren garden, enclosed by a perimeter of bare trees which give the impression of ‘caging’ the protagonist within this dreary location (Figure 5.10). Indeed, only once does Coraline, and hence the film, leave the confines of the house and garden, and she is accompanied on this excursion by her mother (alluding to the central importance of the mother-child relationship to the narrative). As such, *Coraline*, to a much greater extent than *Monster House* and *The Hole*, does the most to utilise visual methods to reflect its protagonist’s ‘entrapment’ – both within the home and within the state of childhood.

In the early moments of *Coraline*, as the character explores the Pink Palace’s garden, she is shot several times through the leaves of a bush, from behind a rock, or from higher ground (Figure 5.11). As well as functioning as objects which continue to visually entrap Coraline in her environment, these shots imitate the voyeuristic point-of-view shots that are most associated with the slasher film; in *Halloween*, for instance, the viewer is very often



Figure 5.9: Coraline’s new home, the dreary Pink Palace.



Figure 5.10: The *mise-en-scène* gives the impression of Coraline being caged within her environment.



Figure 5.11: Coraline is shot as if being watched by a hidden stalker.

forced to view the action through the gaze of Michael as he stalks his victims. In *Coraline*, like the slasher, the identity of the voyeur is withheld for a large portion of the narrative, but it later becomes evident that it was the omnipotent gaze of Other Mother. The ambiguity of these early voyeuristic shots resonate with Clover's analysis of the slasher's point-of-view shot as shifting between aligning the viewer with the 'assaultive gazer', the killer (1992: 211), and revealing 'vulnerability' in that the subjective camera 'calls attention to what it cannot see' (ibid.: 187). Indeed, the nature of 'seeing' is vital to *Coraline* and *The Hole*, particularly in relation to the protagonists' relationships with their parents, their navigations of their homes, and their attempts to secure their identities and independence.

### Out of Sight, Out of Mind: seeing and being seen in *Coraline* and *The Hole*

As this chapter has already noted, the uncanny and the home are inexorably linked. The uncanny is also linked strongly with the eyes, as many phenomena described as uncanny arouse what Jentsch refers to as 'intellectual uncertainty' by causing disbelief in what one is seeing, e.g. inanimate objects becoming animated, doubles and déjà vu (Freud, 1919: 125). These motifs and more are present in *Coraline*, as the Other home is populated with toys and other inanimate objects that come to life, moving photographs, and the fact that it is an almost exact duplicate of Coraline's real home, containing near-identical copies of her parents and neighbours. These work to make the Other home both wondrously appealing as well as unsettling, a clash which results in an uncanny feeling. Yet the uncanny can also relate just as much to the *inability* to see, given that it is often evoked by 'things that are unsettling and uncertain, lurking on the edge of our vision, troubling and worrying at us' (Peirse, 2008: 113). This inability to see can be figurative, relating to unidentifiable repressed feelings lurking on the edge of our consciousness, or literal, which is often taken advantage of in horror cinema through the hiding and obscuring of threats in darkness and shadows (Cherry,

2009: 127). Freud reads the fear of loss or damage to the eyes (which he sees as particularly strong in children) as representing a fear of castration anxiety (1919: 139-40). He refers to Oedipus Rex who blinds himself as a 'form of the penalty of castration' in punishment for desiring his mother and taking on the role of his father (ibid.). Thus, damage to the eyes becomes linked directly to the fear of one's identity becoming fused or replaced with that of a parent. This occurs overtly in *Coraline*, where the threatened castration of Coraline's eyes and their replacement with buttons will allow Other Mother to consume Coraline's soul. The psychoanalytic link between eyes and identity in the novel version of *Coraline* has been discussed at length by others, such as David Rudd in his aptly titled article, 'An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity' (2008).<sup>2</sup> Given that the film is a very faithful adaptation of the novel's narrative and themes, Rudd's analysis is applicable to the film and a repetition of his argument here would be redundant. Continuing with this uncanny theme of anxiety surrounding seeing, this section will instead unpack how filmmaking techniques specific to the moving image articulate the importance of seeing and being seen in *Coraline* and *The Hole*, particularly with regards to the protagonists' identities and the danger of them being taken over by those of monstrous parents. This discussion continues to engage with critical work on the slasher film.

Clover states that '[e]yes are everywhere in horror' and that, more than any other genre, the horror film 'is *about* eyes' (1992: 166-67; my emphasis). Indeed, as articulated by King, the eyes have a particularly vulnerable and abject quality that seems well suited to the horror genre:

Imagine [...] jamming your thumb into someone's wide-open eye, feeling the squish, seeing it sorta squirt out at you. [...] We all understand that eyes are

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview and discussion of further articles that take a psychoanalytic approach to the novel, see Chloé Germaine Buckley (2015).

the most vulnerable of our sensory organs [...] and [they] are (ick!) *soft*. Maybe that's the worst... (1981: 220-21)

*Coraline* makes effective use of protruding 3D shots in order to make an 'assault' on the audience's eyes, eliciting sympathy for Coraline's plight. One such shot is in the film's opening credits sequence, in which a needle is pushed through fabric directly into the audience space. *The Hole's* subtler use of 3D is more concerned with 'extending the diegesis outwards rather than chucking objects out of it' (Weetch, 2012: 15), which makes a rare 'assaultive' shot all the more noticeable and effective. Similarly to *Coraline's* 'needle shot', *The Hole* contains a shot from inside of the hole, into which nails dropped by the children hurtle down towards the camera and the audience's own eyes. However, Clover's statement concerning the importance of eyes in horror does not refer to actual eyes, but to the acts of looking, being looked at, and the relationship between the two. As mentioned above, slasher films convey voyeurism by using subjective shots from the point-of-view of the stalker/killer. However, the subjective camera can also be ambiguous, and shifts the audience's identification between the killer and the victim/heroine: 'We are both Red Riding Hood *and* the Wolf' (Clover, 1992: 12). Dika similarly reads *Halloween's* protagonist, Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis), and killer, Michael (Tony Moran), as 'represent[ing] opposing aspects of a single self' (1990: 50). In Dika's view, *Halloween* stages a 'power struggle between Michael and Laurie over the control of the film's visual field' (ibid.: 48). Dika reads the prevalence of shots from Michael's point-of-view at the beginning of the film as indicating 'Michael's complete control over the image', and that the rest of the film 'moves from a series of ambiguously authored images that implicate [...] Michael's lurking presence to a period of struggle, where Laurie tries to reclaim the film's visual space' (ibid.). Dika's reading of *Halloween* can also be applied to *Coraline* and *The Hole* in order to uncover how these films stage the protagonists' struggles to secure independent identities from those of their parents, and by extension address these same concerns in model child viewers.

With regards to *The Hole*, Owen Weetch (2013) has applied Dika's work to the climactic sequence in which Dane enters the hole in order to confront his 'father' (that is, the manifestation of his father conjured by the hole).<sup>3</sup> However, unaddressed by Weetch is that the struggle for control over the visual field between Dane and the entity within the hole begins much earlier in the film. From the moment Dane and Lucas discover the hole they, along with Julie, spend a great deal of time looking into it. As they do not know the nature of the hole nor what is inside, due to its oppressive darkness, they are looking without knowing. In contrast, the numerous shots of the children from inside the depths of the hole strongly indicate that the entity inside the hole is not ignorant in this way (Figure 5.12). That the hole is watching them becomes manifested literally in a scene in which, having lowered a video camera inside the hole in an attempt to find out what is inside, Dane, Lucas and Julie watch the recording on the television. They see an abstract shape but cannot tell what it is, and are then interrupted and distracted by Susan. With their backs turned to the television, the video continues to play. The abstract shape moves and is revealed to be an eye staring out at them and, by extension, the audience (Figure 5.13). This is all the more disconcerting as the audience's attention is not directed to the television in the background, but the characters in the foreground. Thus, when the audience *does* come to notice the eye it evokes the uncanny sense of having being unknowingly watched, which is so often utilised in the slasher. It is also possible read the eye in *The Hole* as a marker of identity. While the owner of the eye is never identified, it could be the eye of the hole's apparition of Dane and Lucas' father, the father whom Dane is afraid he will become. In this context, the eye can be

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<sup>3</sup> References throughout this chapter to the hole's manifestation of the father are presented within quotation marks, i.e. 'father' or 'Mr Thompson', as opposed to references to the actual father (who is spoken about, but never seen) which are presented without quotation marks. The 'father' is portrayed by three actors: Douglas Chapman portrays as the 'normal' version, while John DeSantis and Wade Williams portray the body and voice, respectively, of the monstrous version which reflects the way that Dane imagines his estranged father to look.

interpreted as representing the identity of abusive masculinity that Dane fears will replace his own.



*Figure 5.12: Lucas, Dane and Julie looking into the hole, which is implied to be looking back at them.*



*Figure 5.13: The sense that the children are being watched by the hole is confirmed.*



*Figure 5.14: Dane gains control over the visual field, and thus his identity.*

These shots which imply the hole watching the unknowing children thus place control over the film's visual field with the hole itself, or at least the entity that lurks inside of it. This builds to the climax in which Dane goes inside of the hole to rescue Lucas, defeat the hole's projection of his father, and wrestle for and win control over the visual field. In so doing, he wins control over his own identity rather than fearing it will be dominated by the

identity of his father. As argued by Weetch, this battle is enhanced by the use of 3D. Regarding *Halloween*, Dika reads the battle for visual control as eventually bringing the unseen threat – that of the voyeuristic killer who until this point in the film has largely eluded the visual field – ‘out into the open [...] the objective camera now including them both within the frame’ (1990: 49). Crucially, this is also the point in *Halloween* when Laurie unmasks Michael, giving her the power to *see* the hitherto unseen threat (ibid.: 50). Weetch identifies a similar moment in the climax of *The Hole*, in which Dane and ‘Mr Thompson’ finally face each other (2013: 389). Thus, *The Hole* emphasises the importance of seeing: in this context seeing, and vanquishing, one’s fears. Creepy Carl (Bruce Dern) – an elderly victim of the hole – deliberately refuses to face his fear which is, appropriately, the dark. This refusal to confront his fear results in his death. Returning to the climax of the film, Weetch points out that when Dane and his ‘father’ confront each other they both emerge slightly in 3D, figuring them as equals (ibid.). The power between the characters shifts in Dane’s favour throughout the sequence, as he asserts ‘You can’t hurt me’ and ‘You were scared of everybody else, weren’t you?’ Dane’s voicing of these revelations takes a toll on the other’s power over the situation, simultaneously reflected in ‘Mr Thompson’s’ loss of control of both the 3D space and the frame. Where before they both emerged outwards, ‘Mr Thompson’ recedes into the depths of positive parallax and Dane remains emerged from the screen, dominating both the frame and 3D space (ibid.: 398-99). This domination of the visual – and spatial – field signals the rejection of his father’s identity in favour of his own (Figure 5.14).

The following discussion of *Coraline* moves away from analysis of the use of 3D, but applies the arguments of Dika and Weetch to highlight how the film conveys a struggle between Coraline and Other Mother for control over the visual field and, by extension, for Coraline’s soul. *Coraline*’s opening credits sequence occurs from the point-of-view of an anonymous party, later understood to be Other Mother, as they create the Coraline doppelganger doll. The only clues given to the figure’s identity are the mechanical hands at

work on the doll. Almost immediately following this sequence are the voyeuristic shots described above which position Coraline as the subject of an unknown gaze. The adjacency of these two sequences invites the audience to assume that the creator of the doll and the gazer are the same being, i.e. Other Mother. Thus, as in *Halloween*, the film's villain is given control of the visual field in the opening scenes, positioning the heroine as a vulnerable and unknowing victim. Over the course of the film, power over the visual field gradually shifts to Coraline to as she comes closer to defeating Other Mother, reflecting the power struggle Dika traces in *Halloween* and that Weetch applies to *The Hole*. However, being seen, and who she is seen by, is also important to Coraline's journey. In relation to the uncanny in Gothic children's literature, Anna Jackson claims that a 'sense of identity, or the possession of a sense of self, is shown to depend quite a lot on being noticed by other people' (2008: 160). This can be applied to Coraline, demonstrated by shots from the first half of the film from Coraline's point-of-view. These subjective shots, rather than representing her power over the visual field, or conversely doing what Clover describes as 'call[ing] attention to what [she] cannot see' (1992: 187), show us the extent to which Coraline is not seen by *other* people, specifically those she most desires to be seen by: her parents.

When Coraline enters her father's study, we see from her perspective that his back is turned, and throughout their interaction he looks at her reflection in the computer screen (Figure 5.15). When he does look directly at her, it is only to implore her to let him work in peace. Similarly, in a preceding scene in the kitchen, an over-the-shoulder shot aligns the viewer with Coraline's perspective to show that her mother only looks at Coraline when it is to scold her (Figure 5.16). When she enters the Other home, further subjective shots are used to emphasise that the Other parents *do* look at Coraline, feeding her desire to be noticed (Figures 5.17-5.18). This is also verbalised when, at the end of Coraline's first venture into the Other home, Other Mother and Father bid farewell by saying 'See you soon'. Of course, the irony is that their absence of real eyes means that they are not *really* seeing her,



but giving the impression of it, alluding to the fact that the Other home is no better than her reality.



Figure 5.15: Coraline's parents rarely look directly at her, as demonstrated here by her father.



Figure 5.16: Here Coraline's mother looks directly at her, but in a negative context.



Figure 5.17: Other Father making 'eye contact' with Coraline.



Figure 5.18: Other Mother making 'eye contact' with Coraline.

A brief detour is needed here to address the potentially troubling neglect of Coraline by her parents. In her comparison of the novel and the film Myers is extremely critical of the latter's portrayal of the parents, claiming that it 'criticizes modern working parents (and in particular mothers) who cannot constantly be at their child's beck and call' (2012: 251). A similar criticism could be levelled at Susan, the mother in *The Hole*, DJ's parents in *Monster House*, and the parents of the children in *The Monster Squad* and *Hocus Pocus* as discussed in the previous chapter. In *The Hole*, Susan frequently leaves Dane and Lucas at home alone to go to work, and is ignorant of the threat of the hole, despite it sometimes being literally in front of her eyes, as in the television sequence analysed above. In *Monster House*, DJ's parents leave him in the care of a deceitful babysitter, Zee (Maggie Gyllenhaal), so they can attend a dental convention. To further highlight their ineffectuality as carers of children, they accidentally run over Chowder when reversing from the driveway on their way to the convention. This draws yet another link to the slasher; Pat Gill highlights that the subgenre

shows ‘teenagers in peril, no hope of help from their parents’, who are ‘too busy or involved in their own problems or pleasures to help’ (2002: 17). As a result, these parents are absent, both ‘physically and emotionally, from their children’s lives’ (ibid.). Myers’ and Gill’s criticisms might seem valid, but absent parents is a vital narrative element of children’s horror as it grants the child protagonists the power and agency to gain their own independence and responsibility. Indeed, Propp argues that the absence of the parents or family is an integral function of the fairy tale (1968: 26). We can also assume that adult characters would call the police or other authorities if they were made aware of the supernatural threats to their children, but as shown by the spectre of a dead policeman in *The Hole* (Peter Shinkoda) and the buffoonish officers in *Monster House* (Kevin James and Nick Cannon), who are later ‘eaten’ by the house, police are of no help in these situations. Child characters are therefore placed in a privileged position where only they have the imaginative capacity to understand and/or believe in the supernatural. DJ says as much in *Monster House* when he tells Jenny that calling her mother is futile because the situation is ‘too much for the adult mind to comprehend’. With some exceptions of adult characters who are in the know, but unable or unwilling to help (and, as discussed in the previous chapter, are usually elderly allies, like *The Hole*’s Creepy Carl or *Monster House*’s Nebbercracker), it is left up to the children alone to defeat the evil that threatens them, and their homes and families.

In *Coraline* specifically, it is arguable that although Coraline’s parents can be read as neglectful in these early scenes it is not implied that they are bad parents, but are simply trying their best to juggle an important work project, a house move, and a bored child. Coraline’s problem can therefore be read as over-reliance on her parents – but especially her mother – to occupy her, and her lack of patience towards them as they navigate a stressful, but temporary, period of their lives. As astutely put by Rudd, ‘she has to accept that she cannot be all to her parents’ (2008: 164). This recalls Scott and Doyle Francis’ claim that in

children's literature the concept of home is 'a place of comfort, security, and acceptance' (1993: 223). While this can refer to a child's acceptance *by* others, like their family, it can also be taken to mean the child's acceptance *of* their family and of their home. For Coraline, this acceptance of her parents and her new home only occurs after having had her wish for more parental attention granted by Other Mother, only to realise that that this suffocating, over-bearing form of parenting is not what she truly wants.

It is after her disillusionment with Other Mother that power over the visual field begins to shift to Coraline, reflected by the film's repeated use of shots from her perspective. In the final act of the film, Coraline bargains with Other Mother that if she can locate the souls of three ghost children who previously fell victim to Other Mother, and find where her captured parents are hidden, Other Mother will set them all free. If not, Coraline's eyes will be replaced with buttons and she will be doomed to spend eternity in the Other realm. Coraline succeeds in her quest with the help of a magic stone gifted to her by her eccentric elderly neighbours, Miss Spink (Jennifer Saunders) and Miss Forcible (Dawn French). When the hole in the centre of the stone is looked through, which the audience can do via yet more subjective shots, the stone makes the Other realm appear grey, allowing Coraline to more easily locate the brightly glowing coloured souls of the ghost children which are encased in small eye-like balls. Coraline's utilisation of the sense of sight thus becomes an integral tool in her both defeating Other Mother and asserting control over her identity. Then, in her climactic battle with Other Mother, she is able to escape when she throws her talking cat companion (Keith David) at Other Mother, and the cat scratches out Other Mother's button eyes so that she loses the ability to see. This marks the most significant shift in visual control of the film, and allows Coraline to escape and lock the door to the Other home behind her. After a short and successful battle with one of Other Mother's disembodied hands, which evaded imprisonment in the Other home, the film closes with an extended long take from Coraline's point-of-view. This shows that her parents now look directly at her, and in a

positive context rather than one of negativity, reflecting her newfound acceptance of her parents, her home, and her own sense of self (Figure 5.19).

Performing a reading of the ways *Coraline* and *The Hole* employ methods associated with the slasher illustrates not only how these films portray the relationships between the child protagonists and their parents, but also how voyeuristic filmmaking techniques establish uncanny atmospheres of paranoia, claustrophobia and vulnerability in and around the home. The unsettling atmospheres of these films are amplified due to their being set almost entirely in one location, the home, a place that is usually considered to be a space of comfort and security. The shift of power of the visual field, and the characters' employments of the power of sight, also serves to transfer the protagonists from states of entrapment (within the visual field of a predator, and within the space of the home) to states of empowerment. Moving away from an exploration of critical work on the slasher and its employment of the gaze, the following section begins by addressing some further ways that these protagonists can be considered 'entrapped' both within the home and within the states of childhood through the use of two 'homely' motifs.



Figure 5.19: Coraline's parents looking at her at the end of the film.

### Through the Trap Door: encounters with the 'other'

This chapter considers the protagonists of *Coraline*, *The Hole* and *Monster House* as being in liminal states, 'existing between the categories of child and adult', simultaneously reflected by their being literally 'trapped in the interstices of the family home' (Wheatley, 2012: 389). This articulation of entrapment within the state of childhood is considered to resonate with the hypothetical child viewer who is constructed and addressed by these texts. Two motifs that frequently signify this entrapment are the window and the door, the function of which in 1940s woman's Gothic film is explored by Doane. Doane explains that the window 'has a special import in terms of the social and symbolic positioning of the woman'; it is 'the interface between the inside and the outside, the feminine space of the family and reproduction and the masculine space of production' (1987: 138). The window thus embodies a social and literal boundary which must not be crossed by the films' entrapped heroines. This can be applied to the children's horror film, in which the window functions as a metaphorical boundary between childhood and adolescence, or adolescence and adulthood. The door can also be read in this way but, as noted by Doane, also signifies temptation and transgression:

The paranoid gothic films simply exacerbate a generalized tendency of the suspense film – the tendency to organize drama of seeing around the phenomenon of the closed or locked door and the temptation it offers (ibid.: 137)

In all three of this chapter's key texts the door is of great importance, particularly in the transgressive element of the children's looking into and crossing the thresholds of forbidden doorways which function as rites of passage, a necessary part of their growing up. Their lingering around and entrapment within the spaces of these doorways and windows can be read as representing their states of arrested development. By extension, their crossings of

these boundaries function as transgressive movements that signal shifts in their maturity and their relationships to their homes and parents.

According to Doane, 'what the woman [in the 1940s woman's Gothic film] confronts on the other side of the door is an aspect of herself' (ibid.). Usually this is in the figure of another woman, such as the first wife of the love interest with whom the female protagonist desires to be. Doane continues, 'The door in these films opens onto a [metaphorical] mirror, and the process is one of doubling or repetition, locking the woman within a narcissistic construct' (ibid.). This is also reminiscent of Bettelheim's psychoanalytic reading of several fairy tales, as referred to in Chapter Three of this thesis, that 'victory is not over others but only over oneself and over villainy (mainly one's own, which is projected as the hero's antagonist)' (1976: 128). In destroying the villain, who embodies the fairy tale hero or heroine's own worst aspects, they destroy that aspect in themselves. We can see the transgressive crossing of boundaries in *Coraline*, *The Hole* and *Monster House* in much the same way: when the children cross the threshold of the significant doors in these narratives they encounter the films' villains, who can be read as 'other' aspects of the children themselves – facets of their personalities or desires which until that point had been unacknowledged or ignored. Encounters with these 'others' can be considered uncanny experiences, given the motif of the double and that they involve repressed feelings or desires becoming known. Taking the transgressive crossing of boundaries into an alternate 'home' as starting points, this section explores what occurs when these characters cross over a boundary into an alternate home and what they encounter there. As Curtis claims that in the haunted house film there is 'a particularly intense relationship between narrative and mise-en-scène' (2008: 11), this section also furthers the discussions from earlier in this chapter on the films' mise-en-scène. Particular attention is paid to the changes in mise-en-scène between the differing homes in each film, and how these changes reflect the protagonists' shifting states of mind and attitudes toward these homes and the 'others' they encounter

within them. This discussion is divided into two sub-sections due to the fact that the narratives are heavily gender-specific: *Coraline* is a predominantly female-centric narrative concerning a girl and her 'mother'; *The Hole* conversely is a male-centric narrative concerning an adolescent male and his 'father'; the third, *Monster House*, provides a bridge between the two by pitting a boy and his two friends against a monstrous female entity.

### **Defeating the maternal monster**

*Coraline* makes particular use of windows and doors to frame and 'entrap' its heroine. In one early shot she is shown behind a kitchen window, shot from the outside, while chatting with her mother. Raindrops trickle down the glass, bringing further attention to this invisible barrier (Figure 5.20). This effect is enhanced when viewed in 3D, where the illusion of depth created between the raindrops in the foreground and Coraline in mid-ground further give the impression of being 'caged' behind the window. Where Doane reads the window in the 1940s woman's Gothic film as signifying the entrapment of female protagonists within a specifically female space, in *Coraline* this can also be read as reflecting her 'entrapment' within childhood, and a particular form of childishness that depends on acknowledgment by her parents to feel as if she exists. What follows is the aforementioned scene in which Coraline goes to pester her father in his study while he attempts to work. She lingers in the doorway, not fully entering the room, and swings impatiently and childishly on the doorknob as she is steadfastly ignored (Figure 5.21). Like the window, we can read Coraline's framing within and lingering on a physical barrier as reflecting her being stuck on and/or unable to cross a metaphorical one. These filmic methods contribute to those discussed earlier in this chapter – such as her drab and grey-coloured claustrophobic environment and the stalker-like point-of-view shots – which reflect her sense of entrapment within and distaste toward her surroundings. Further, there is a stark contrast between Coraline's 'real' world and the alternate realm of Other Mother, reflecting Coraline's differing attitudes towards each.



Figure 5.20: The window and the raindrops function as an invisible barrier.



Figure 5.21: Coraline lingers in and around doorframes.

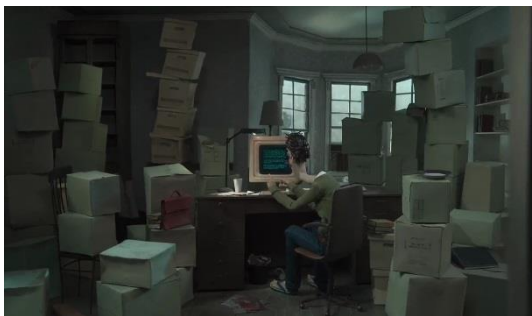


Figure 5.22: Repetitive use of subjective shots highlight the stark differences between Coraline's real home...



Figure 5.23: ...and the Other home.



Figure 5.24: Coraline's bedroom in the Other home.



Figure 5.25: Coraline's bedroom in the real home.



Figure 5.26: The garish colours of the Other home.



Figure 5.27: Coraline's Other Mother in one of her monstrous forms.



The door motif and the point-of-view shot are both used to great effect in order to highlight the uncanny similarities and differences between realms, such as in the aforementioned subjective shots in which Coraline pushes open the door of her father's study (Figure 5.22). This shot is repeated when she is exploring the Other home for the first time (Figure 5.23). The former reveals the study to be a distinctly unhomely cold-grey and claustrophobically filled to the ceiling with cardboard boxes, while the latter reveals the Other study to be much more appealing with warm hues of red, blue, orange and purple and with much more open space which is enhanced by the depth provided in the 3D format.<sup>4</sup> The use of 3D to highlight the differences between the real home and the Other home is the most noticeable in Coraline's bedroom. Scott Higgins observes that the Other bedroom is 'elegantly spacious, deep, and geometrically consistent', and a backwards tracking shot contributes to the sensation of open space, which the 3D accentuates in order to give the impression of the space literally expanding (2012: 204) (Figure 5.24). For Higgins, the shot's way of 'inflating, and penetrating cinematic space [...] expresses Coraline's exhilaration' at being in the Other home (ibid.). When this shot is repeated in the real bedroom, the saturated pinks and blues give way to cold grey hues and 'the volume of the space contracts' (ibid.) (Figure 5.25). Higgins also notes that 3D gives the real bedroom an 'impossible geometry': 'A bay window on the back wall awkwardly angles outward next to a doorframe, which angles inward. This door, in turn, is set into a wall which thrusts outward' (ibid.). Higgins' descriptions of the Other home as being 'geometrically consistent', while the real home's geometry is 'impossible', is interesting in comparison to *The Wizard of Oz*, which was an influence on *Coraline* (Desowitz, 2009); it runs contra Rushdie's description of Kansas as being characterised by 'geometrical simplicity' to reflect its mundanity, and Oz, the fantastic

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<sup>4</sup> To refer again to the landmark film concerning the home discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the action of Coraline pushing open the door to reveal a wondrous, bright world where there was once an almost monochromatic and dull one is highly reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*'s iconic moment in which Dorothy, having just landed in Oz, opens her front door to reveal the Technicolor fantasy landscape.

alternate, as a dangerous place that is full of 'twisty' shapes (1992: 22). However, Dorothy desires to return home from the very moment she arrives in Oz, and so Rushdie's reading of Oz as 'irregular and misshapen' reflects the danger and unfamiliarity from which she wants to escape. Coraline, on the other hand, is initially drawn to this Other home. The overt pleasantness of the Other home thus has the dual function of reflecting Coraline's joy at being there, even though it has been specifically designed that way to serve Other Mother's sinister plan to lure Coraline in.

It is only *after* Coraline realises the ghastly truth about Other Mother and the Other home that she wishes to escape it, and her view of it as unappealing and dangerous is reflected in the Other home's colouring and décor. The once warm and saturated colours become neon and garish (Figure 5.26). Writing on the use of colour in neo-noir, Kathrina Glitre considers excessive, vivid colours to be associated with 'morally dangerous locations, [...] where seductions, conspiracies and crimes take place' (2009: 19). While *Coraline* is not a neo-noir film, Other Mother possesses characteristics of the *femme fatale*: a mysterious and alluring woman who seduces and ultimately betrays the protagonist. The garden of the Other home, which is made up of flowerbeds that are arranged to look like Coraline's face, is also affected by these changes: where before it was a wondrous delight filled with glorious flowers and plants that grew rapidly in front of Coraline's eyes, after Coraline's disillusionment the flowers take on a life of their own and attempt to attack and restrain her. Parallel to these changes to the Other home, Other Mother's appearance alters in line with Coraline's perception of her, as well as with what Coraline *wants* from her. If, according to Doane, what a protagonist finds on the other side of a forbidden door is a 'mirror' of themselves, then Other Mother can be considered a reflection of Coraline's intense desires for more attentive and appealing parents. According to psychoanalytic thought, children often psychologically deal with distressing situations by 'mentally "splitting" the mother into two psychic entities: a gratifying "good mother" and a frustrating "bad mother"' (Cashdan,

1999: 27). This is read by Bettelheim as playing out in classic fairy tales via the characters of the good mother or grandmother of the protagonist and the evil step-mother. In *Coraline*, Other Mother, though the 'bad mother' at heart, at first represents Coraline's projection of the ideal 'good mother' who draws upon traditional norms of motherhood and femininity. Other Mother seems uncannily like the real mother upon first glance but, in addition to her button eyes, she is more overtly fashionable and attractive, with sleek, neat hair, red lipstick and nail varnish. As Coraline becomes more enticed by the Other home, Other Mother becomes even more glamorous, donning a tight-fitting black and red dress and red high heels (hinting toward her true nature as a *femme fatale*).

Other Mother also has marvellous cooking skills and produces some of Coraline's favourite dishes which are, like so many of the objects in the Other home, made uncannily by being served on animated dishes or being animated themselves, such as a cake served to Coraline upon which lit candles and the words 'Welcome Home!' appear as if by magic. Other Mother's skills are in opposition to those of Coraline's real mother who does not cook, and her father who only cooks food that Coraline dislikes. However, while Coraline may at first see the 'beautified' Other Mother as appealing, her appearance falls under the way that children's stories often 'reveal the stepmother's identity as a fake [...] an imposter who indulges her vanity at the expense of her family' (Alston, 2008: 112). That food is a key part of Coraline being drawn in by Other Mother aligns with Wendy Katz's claim that food is 'the sex of children's literature' (1980: 192), and the significance of food to children can be traced back to the highly intimate act of mothers feeding children from their own breast. Recalling the discussion of the witches' lack of maternal instincts in the previous chapter, Other Mother's uses of both physical beauty and food as methods of seduction come across as betrayals of the maternal bond. As Coraline becomes disillusioned with Other Mother, the latter's attempts to imitate traditional acts of mothering become increasingly monstrous, as does her appearance (Figure 5.27). As the film progresses her limbs become elongated, she

gains additional ones, and in the film's climactic battle the Other living room becomes a giant spider's web. Coats, writing on the novel, links hands and spiders to motherhood in 'a child's psycho-symbolic world', arguing that it makes sense for mothers, who do so many things on behalf of their children and are often considered adept multi-taskers, to be 'represented as having more than the requisite number of arms and fingers' (2008: 89). Coraline's initial desire to have a more attentive, attractive and 'motherly' mother thus becomes represented as a warped, monstrous and abject version of this.

Other Mother's monstrosity ultimately reveals that, rather than truly being the 'good mother' that Coraline desires, she was merely a shallow and poor imitation, a 'monster of misplaced maternal instinct' (Scott, 2009). A mirror of Coraline's most intense desires for more parental attention, she takes motherhood to its most horrific and suffocating extreme. Therefore, while Coraline might initially desire more (s)mothering, the film indicates that she – and the child viewers who are the subject of the film's address – needs to learn to exist outside of the attentions of her mother. Although Coraline's behaviour in the first portion of the film suggests that she desires the attention of both of her real parents equally, that Other Mother has such prominence in the Other home suggests that on a subconscious level Coraline may crave a more 'traditional', patriarchal family dynamic – one in which the mother is associated with domesticity and remains at home to dote on her, rather than her reality in which both of the parents work and thus seem to have less time for her. Interestingly, Coats points out that it is the *mother* who provides Coraline with the key to the door to the Other home, thus allowing Coraline to explore her subconscious desires which will eventually result in her realising what it is she truly wants (2008: 87). It is due to the importance of and attachment to the mother that, as explained by Coats, children must go through a 'process of birthing an ego – separate from that of their mothers' (ibid.).

In *Coraline* this 'birthing' is illustrated in quite literal terms. That Other Mother's bodily transformation into a monster occurs in tandem with the changes in appearance to the Other home invites an analysis using Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine. As outlined in the previous chapter, the monstrous feminine is a patriarchal construct of 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (1986: 44). This is sometimes realised as the 'phallic mother' who compensates for her 'horrifying' lack of a penis with other phallic appendages; however, the possession of these also identifies her as a castrator and a threat to men (ibid.). Other Mother, with her additional, elongated limbs and that she is a literally castrating figure of her victims' eyes and souls, matches this description. Creed also draws upon Kristeva's concept of the 'abject mother': according to Kristeva, all individuals experience abjection at the earliest attempts to break away from the mother, but simultaneously the mother is 'reluctant to release' the child (ibid.: 49). We can see this at play in *Coraline* where, after becoming repelled by Other Mother, Coraline attempts to escape from her castrating clutches.

Of most relevance here is Creed's reading of the monstrous feminine in *Alien* (Scott, 1979). Creed considers the film as being filled with references to and imagery of the monstrous feminine, with its vaginal openings of spaceships into which the crewmembers crawl, long, winding tunnels, womblike chambers, and that the on-board computer which conspires against the crew is called 'Mother' (1986: 55-57). In *Coraline* the Other home can be similarly read as an extension of Other Mother's body, especially in terms of reproductive imagery: the home itself functions as the womb, and the door and tunnel leading to it as the vagina and vaginal canal. This imagery extends to the Other garden and its malicious plants, as flowering imagery is often associated with female genitalia (Alston, 2008: 86). Coats, in her analysis of Gothic children's fiction, links childhood fears to 'the anxious residue of the trauma of separation from that first womb-home' (2008: 80). Thus, returning to the significance of doors and transgressed boundaries in the film, we can see Coraline's first

instance of crawling through the door and tunnel that connects the real and Other homes as a retreat back into the (Other Mother's) womb, to a place where, literally *inside* of Other Mother, she will feel desired rather than ignored. When Curtis writes that haunted house narratives often describe a 'rebirth in which the survivors escape from a house which is a metaphoric "bad mother"' (2008: 16), he inadvertently describes the ending of *Coraline*, in which Coraline realises that Other Mother is not the good mother she had thought her to be, rejects her, and escapes back through the vaginal tunnel from which she is 'reborn'. Where before Coraline was literally split between two homes and two families, representing her being split subjectively between conflicting desires, she is now 'whole' and accepting of one home and one family. In the final scene of the film the *mise-en-scène* changes again to reflect Coraline's refreshed state of mind and her attitude to her surroundings. Where before the home and landscape were characterised by a drab, grey-blue colour palette and dreary weather, now the sun shines and the pastel colours are warm and bright – just not artificially so, as in the Other realm (Figure 5.19).

Recalling the previous chapter's discussion of *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus*, *Coraline*'s painting of motherhood and certain female identities as 'monstrous' is troubling. Creed considers the monstrous feminine an imagined patriarchal construct which paints the feminine as monstrous precisely in order to justify repressing and controlling it 'in order to secure and protect the social order' (1986: 70). Indeed, although Other Mother draws upon 'traditional' images of femininity and motherhood in order to seduce Coraline, she certainly does not fit the patriarchal image of a serene, obedient housewife. Rather, her attractive appearance is a lie, and as she becomes more monstrous and phallic-looking she becomes increasingly threatening not just to Coraline, but to male figures in the Other home. Other Father, for example, is reduced to a shapeless, flaccid husk who is dragged around by Other Mother like a rag doll in punishment for trying to warn Coraline about Other Mother. Later, he is engulfed by the yonic flowers of Other Mother's garden. More than just a literally

castrating figure (of the eyes, of identities), Other Mother therefore also signifies a male fear of genital castration. Calling back to the arguments made in the previous chapter regarding address – that is, whether it is actually the fears of adults or children that are being catered to in children’s horror films – the presentation of Other Mother as a transgressive and monstrous female figure begs the question of what this predominantly adult male fear of a castrating female figure has to do with children. As with Eva in *The Witches* as discussed in the previous chapter, Other Mother’s overt sexuality that threatens patriarchal authority may resonate with model child viewers as signifying a threat to the traditional nuclear family dynamic.

M. Keith Booker reminds us that children’s films ‘can have a profound impact at the level of promoting certain fundamental attitudes and basic expectations concerning what the world is like and how one should live in it’ (2010: 175). Children’s horror films, and children’s films in general, might therefore be very suggestive in showing children what forms of adult behaviour, particularly gendered behaviour, are considered acceptable and should be emulated as they grow older. In this regard, *Coraline*’s representation of an authoritative female and mother figure as a castrating, male-dominating monster who must be destroyed is very problematic. A little comfort can be taken in that Coraline’s real parents appear to be equals, for example in that they both have careers and share domestic duties. Their equality is represented visually by the two-sided doll crafted by Other Mother that Coraline finds once they have been captured, bonding them together as one. However, as *Coraline* is the only film discussed in this thesis to have a sole female protagonist, it is important to consider how she may have been affected by her confrontation with, and destruction of, a transgressive female. Although at the end of the film Coraline seems to have overcome her anxieties concerning her home and parents, she also displays some particularly gendered behaviour. In the final scene, she takes on a role as hostess/server as she obediently passes around drinks to her parents and neighbours in the garden. This is a

huge contrast to her behaviour at beginning of the film where she played freely in the garden, exploring and getting mucky, and was frustrated to be ‘trapped’ within the oppressive space of the home that in patriarchal discourse is associated with female domesticity. That she appears to have exchanged her former childish, carefree behaviour for docile obedience associated with regressive conceptions of ‘appropriate’ femininity is therefore disheartening.

*Monster House* is also concerning for what it implies about ‘appropriate’ feminine behaviour and its representation of the female body as monstrous. Like *Coraline*, the film blurs the boundary between the female body and the home – arguably even more so when the production background is considered, as actress Kathleen Turner provided motion-capture for the movements of the house when it uproots itself and rampages around the neighbourhood, thus giving the house a ‘human’ quality of movement. Though *Coraline’s* Other home seems to represent only the reproductive parts of the female body, the monster house as body invites a dual reading. The front of the house is clearly figured as a face, where the windows function as eyes, the door as a mouth and the rug which ejects out of the door as a tongue. The trees around the perimeter of the house also function as limbs with which it grabs victims and later ‘walks’ around. As noted by Maria Takolander, who analyses the film using Creed’s concept of the monstrous feminine, ‘the house and its grounds are also represented in ways that evoke images of the female reproductive system’ (2011: 84):

the lawn serves as a pubic mound, and the front door provides the entrance to the red-carpeted hallway, which represents the vaginal canal. This narrow space [...] gives way to a terrifying tooth-filled gateway – clearly representative of the *vagina dentata* or toothed vagina (ibid.)

Takolander provides a convincing analysis of Constance the monster house as representing a misogynistic fear of the female body out of control. She concludes that while the film, which combines computer animation with motion-capture technology, is impressive in terms of



technological innovation, its 'thematic interests and politics, particularly with regard to gender, are decidedly old' (ibid.: 80). However, although Takolander performs a highly detailed analysis of the monster house as an abject female figure, the destruction of which results in a 'symbolic restoration of patriarchy' (ibid.: 90), little attention is given to how this relates to the narrative arc of DJ, particularly the relation between his battle with the monster house and his own maturation. Below it is argued that the function (and destruction) of the monstrous feminine in this text is to assist DJ in adopting a particularly masculine identity, and by extension to coach the model child viewer of the film's address as to how they can do the same. To begin, windows, doors and the crossing of boundaries are again important.

### **Becoming male, destroying the female (revisited)**

DJ is introduced to the audience while spying on Nebbercracker with his telescope through his bedroom window (Figure 5.28). As is suggested above, he is mentally fixated on one house while trapped within another, his childhood home where he is under the rule of his parents. Further, DJ's parents obliquely liken his many hours spent in his room voyeuristically spying on other people to masturbation, referencing his pubescent state. His framing within the window might then reflect, like *Coraline*, his inability to move beyond this state of unrest. This splitting – between homes, between desires, between stages of life – recalls Bronfen's assertion that Hollywood films concerning the home address the experience of not feeling 'master of one's own house', whether a literal house or the figurative 'house' of the mind (2004: 22). The use of the term 'master' is interesting given that this is typically gendered as male. As such, this is even more applicable to DJ, whose narrative arc concerns his desires to obtain a particularly masculine form of maturity, to which the monster house is vital. This brings us to an even more significant barrier or boundary than the window: the boundary surrounding the monster house itself.



Figure 5.28: DJ gazing at the monster house through his bedroom window.



Figure 5.29: DJ and Chowder lingering on the boundary of the monster house, unwilling to cross.

As we have seen in the opening sequence with the little girl, stepping onto the property triggers the wrath of Nebbercracker. After DJ's parents have left, he and Chowder play basketball in the driveway of DJ's home, but Chowder drops the ball and it rolls onto Nebbercracker's front lawn. They run over to get a closer look, but halt at the very edge of the property (Figure 5.29). Although upset that he has lost his ball, Chowder is unwilling to step onto the property to retrieve it. It is highly significant that, while they had been playing basketball, Chowder had been trying to persuade DJ to come trick-or-treating with him, but DJ denied the invitation, claiming that he is 'too grown up'. Chowder turns this statement back on DJ as they stand mournfully gazing at the lost ball: 'You're a grown-up now, you go get it.' These exchanges are just two of many references throughout the film to DJ's desires to appear more mature than he actually is. Chowder also makes some attempts to seem more mature than he really is, but also clearly enjoys revelling in childishness, whether trick-or-treating, making fart noises, or wearing a cape draped around his shoulders in imitation

of a superhero. DJ, in order to prove that his maturity and courage are not merely an act, steps onto the lawn to retrieve the ball, but is stopped from going any further by Nebbercracker who, so angered by DJ's insolence, appears to have a heart attack and die. Put off by this horrific turn of events, the ball is not retrieved and the boys retreat into the safety of DJ's house, to the safety of childishness. Similarly to the characterisation of Max in *Hocus Pocus* as discussed in the previous chapter, the film's implication is that *pretending* to be brave and mature is insufficient to be considered truly mature. This is displayed clearly in DJ, Chowder and Jenny's attempt to gain access into the monster house.

Toys and games are common motifs in both *Monster House* and *The Hole*. In the latter notably when Dane, Lucas and Julie 'guard' the hole with paintball guns and baseball bats. In the former, the monster house consumes the toys of children and then uses them as bait to lure in their former owners, even if they are now an adult, like Bones (Jason Lee), the boyfriend of the babysitter who is lured to the house by his beloved childhood kite. DJ and Chowder get advice on how to defeat the house from a 'man-child', Skull (Jon Heder), at a local arcade who is highly skilled at playing arcade games. DJ and Chowder revere his 'skill' and dedication (such as wearing an adult nappy during a four-day gaming session), and consider him a 'legend' and the 'smartest man alive'. Taking after Skull, DJ and Chowder obsessively spy on the house, treating the operation very seriously by watching it through a telescope all night and keeping detailed records of their observations. Yet, as pointed out by Michael Howarth, 'amid all the raging hormones' and behind their pretence at sophistication lurks their immaturity, signified by their clinging to childish traits such as the stuffed toys that adorn DJ's bedroom (2014: 198). In addition, mimicking Skull's wearing a nappy, they urinate in bottles so that the house never leaves their sight, much to the disgust of the (female) babysitter.<sup>5</sup> A disconnect is shown between their efforts to be mature and the reality of their

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<sup>5</sup> The boys' immature obsession with bodily fluids and functions invites a reading of them being at the 'anal stage' of Freud's theory of psychosexual development. Although the anal stage typically

immaturity, the implication being that one cannot be a 'real' grown-up *and* play with toys. It is therefore not surprising when their attempt to gain access to the house is unsuccessful. The plan involves infiltrating the house with a dummy made from a vacuum cleaner filled with children's cough syrup (to drug the house) and adorned with a Halloween mask to make it look like a trick-or-treating child. The children look on from inside dustbins, armed with childlike weapons of water pistols and slingshots. Two male police officers interfere with the plan, who themselves have an air of pretence, or 'playing' at being tough, capable figures of authority. As a result, the officers are 'eaten' by the house, and the children are shortly afterward forcibly dragged inside by its rug-tongue.

This entrance into the house marks this film's significant boundary-crossing, though is markedly different to *Coraline's*: where Coraline voluntarily crosses the boundary to the Other home, which can be read as a regressive retreat into the mother's womb, DJ is forcibly dragged, such is his inability to untangle his desires to be a 'grown-up' from his desires to remain a child. Later, in what resembles a dual vomiting/birthing scene, the children are ejected onto the lawn through the mouth/vagina in a wave of liquid, a stand in for saliva, vomit and/or amniotic fluid. As pointed out by Takolander, the birth is underscored when Jenny says to the bickering DJ and Chowder, 'You're acting like babies' (2011: 84). DJ replies in a defeatist tone, 'We *are* babies', in reference to their 'childish' attempt to put the house to sleep with cough syrup. Seemingly disappointed with his own childlike ways he announces that he is going home, before he is almost run over by the ambulance returning Nebbercracker home.

Although the film's primary conflict is staged between the children and the monster house, Nebbercracker is integral to the narrative. And indeed, when inside the house the

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occurs during infancy, DJ and Chowder's association with this stage further enforces their immaturity (Freud, 1905: 102-4).

children had discovered its morbid origin which Nebbercracker clarifies for them: Nebbercracker's love for, and subsequent rescue of Constance from a freak show; their marriage and his building of their home; and her death, resulting from being so angered by some children mocking her obesity that she fell into the cement in the foundations of the unfinished house. In the basement of the house the children discover Constance's cement-covered corpse and Nebbercracker's shrine to her. It is due to Constance's body being literally encased in the foundations of the house that her spirit embodies it, tormenting any children that come near. That this discovery is made in the basement is particularly significant as in cinema, especially the horror film, basements are typically presented as sinister, abject and often supernatural spaces where repressed memories, feeling or secrets are (re)discovered (Martin, 2016: 145). When the children confront Nebbercracker about their discovery, he admits that he is not truly a mean, child-hating person, but used this identity as a front to scare children away and thus protect them from the monster house. Nebbercracker's function in the narrative is therefore to present a certain form of male identity: the type of man *not* to be. Specifically, Nebbercracker's inability to assert a dominant masculine identity and appropriately control his transgressive and monstrous 'house-wife' can be interpreted as a failure of the American Dream – a particularly patriarchal construct of it.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, *Monster House* is careful to present the neighbourhood using imagery traditionally associated with the American Dream: the white picket fences, the detached suburban homes alluding to middle-class affluence, and the carefree, joyous demeanour of the unsupervised little girl which establishes the safety of the neighbourhood. The dilapidated monster house stands among this as an example of what the failed Dream looks like, stagnated and stale. If the house is likened to the body of Constance, then we must also read Constance herself, and her marriage to Nebbercracker, as signifying this failure. Via a flashback, Nebbercracker takes us to the post-war 1940s and

1950s, the period with which this particular stereotype of the Dream is the most heavily associated. Betty Friedan, in her scathing critique of the expectations of women during this period, *The Feminine Mystique*, reveals how women were taught to 'devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children', to be adept in every aspect of domesticity and motherhood, and to 'glory in their own femininity' (1963: 13-14). Nebbercracker's flashback shows that Constance did not in any way fit this stereotypical image of the 'perfect' housewife, as she was heavy-set and overweight, so much so that she has been forced to perform at a freak show – a 'monster' in life, as she is in death. She is also a child-hater who threatens to 'rip' the neighbourhood children who tease her 'to bits'. The house that her spirit later embodies is completely absent of any plant-life, other than the grass and the leafless trees. If the house can be read as a womb, then these markers signify it as a barren, inhospitable environment for producing children. When the house is read as a face, this, too references her monstrous failure to fulfil her role as a 'proper' housewife. Nebbercracker, upon returning from the hospital, says lovingly 'Honey, I'm home', a line most commonly associated with being spoken by a husband to his wife after returning home from work in 1950s US sitcoms. He then notes that her shingles are ruffled and her windows cracked, but that it's nothing some 'paint and varnish can't handle', thus implying that her monstrous appearance can be fixed with 'make-up'. These details paint Constance as a portrait of failed womanhood and motherhood in the eyes of patriarchal ideology. If the patriarchal ideal of the American Dream relies on the attainment of the nuclear family, including a wife and children, then Constance stands in the way of this. Her embodiment of the house further transgresses boundaries, recalling Curtis' description of uncanny houses in horror as refusing to remain within 'the limits of their customary significance' (2008: 11). Literally a 'house-wife', Constance oversteps the boundaries of human possibility as well as societal expectations of women. Although women are often associated with the home and domesticity, patriarchal conceptions of the home and family nonetheless hold the husband,

the bread-winner, as the head of the household. This brings us to the depiction of Nebbercracker's masculinity, or lack of it, and how it relates to DJ's arc.

Nebbercracker clearly loves Constance despite her 'condition', and takes a tender, non-violent approach to controlling her. However, the film paints this approach as ineffective, and is just one of many ways in which the film codes him as an emasculated figure dominated by a monstrous matriarch. Takolander comments that Nebbercracker has a feminised appearance as his frail body is covered only by a dress-like hospital gown for the last third of the film (2011: 89). Constance's human appearance, in contrast, is stocky and large, reflected by the house's huge, overbearing shape. When Constance in house form and Nebbercracker appear within the same shot, the contrast in size dwarfs Nebbercracker, emphasising her domination over him (Figure 5.30). This is enhanced further in 3D, where Nebbercracker emerges from the screen. Higgins observes that bringing objects out of the screen in this way makes them appear 'as models because they come within the viewer's grasp' (2012: 200). Applying this to some helicopters in a wide shot in *Avatar*, Higgins argues that their closer proximity to the audience thanks to emergent 3D has the undesirable effect of making them seem 'small and near' rather than large and far away (ibid.). However, that this effect causes Nebbercracker's size to be diminished even further is precisely to the benefit of the way *Monster House*'s mise-en-scène spatially defines character relationships.



Figure 5.30: Constance's massive size dwarfs Nebbercracker – an effect that is enhanced further in 3D.

This inversion of the traditional male-female power dynamic in *Monster House* is established as being in place from the very beginning of Constance and Nebbercracker's relationship, as we see in Nebbercracker's flashback that Constance carried *him* over the threshold of the land where their home will be built, rather than the typical reverse. Nebbercracker's emasculation is best illustrated by the fact that not only is he incapable of keeping Constance/the house under control, but he lives inside of her, literally within the structure of the house that can be read as a symbolic female reproductive system. He is not the only man to be emasculated by Constance, and in fact it is *only* men who are 'eaten' by the house and its monstrous teeth/genitalia: the two policemen and Bones. The climactic destruction of the house frees them in what Takolander calls a 'symbolic restoration of patriarchy' (2011: 90). Crucially, their restoration is only made possible through the actions of DJ. DJ's actions align with a more virile and 'traditional' form of masculinity – one that depends upon the destruction of transgressive femininity.

As described above, after the children's 'rebirth' out of the house DJ dejectedly labels the three of them 'babies' and attempts to go home, to the comfortable world of childhood. Crucially, he does not reach his home and does not return to it at any point during the remainder of the film. Rather, having crossed the boundary of the monster house and encountered the abject feminine inside of it, as well as Nebbercracker's unappealing lack of masculinity – both of them 'others' to the male identity that DJ desires – his rebirth is not a regression to infancy, as he himself considers it to be. Rather, it is a chance for him to begin afresh, to assert a masculine identity of bravery and dominance rather than simply pretend to have one. Indeed, when Nebbercracker is unable to destroy the house on his own he hands some dynamite to DJ, in so doing handing DJ the responsibility to destroy the abject feminine and atoning for his own lack of the proper masculinity needed. The battle against the house takes place on a building site, which a large sign says is going to become the site of an amusement park, a place associated with childhood fun. Where before the children



attempted to sedate the house using toys and other childish methods, now they use 'grown-up' toys/weapons: dynamite and a digger. Their graduation to this level is illustrated by the three of them, in the digger, smashing through the amusement park sign. Though Chowder and Jenny assist with the destruction of the house, their roles in the battle only further establish DJ's masculinity and maturity. Howarth reads Chowder as '[mirroring] DJ's own immaturity while also reminding DJ that such behaviour does not reflect the attitudes and personality traits of a mature adolescent' (2014: 199). This is clear during the battle with the house when Chowder intermittently screams for his mummy, making DJ seem far more mature by comparison. Jenny, who shows significantly more maturity and bravery throughout the film than both Chowder and DJ, is reduced in the battle to the role of love interest and cheerleader, representing a much more 'acceptable' feminine identity than Constance. In order to give DJ the courage to deliver the final blow to the house, she kisses him. DJ then single-handedly destroys the house once and for all by swinging over it on a crane and throwing dynamite down the chimney. The house – and Constance's spirit with it – is demolished in a huge explosion.

This act of extreme violence is in stark contrast to Nebbercracker's method of simply trying to show love and care toward Constance. That the film chooses to promote the former over the latter is troubling, particularly considering it is a film addressed to children. As with *The Witches* and *Hocus Pocus* discussed in the previous chapter, *Monster House* upholds a conservative and misogynistic view that women who do not conform to traditional models of femininity are transgressive, dangerous and monstrous by nature, and must be violently destroyed or tamed by figures of 'acceptable' masculinity. By extension, the film constructs and addresses a male child viewer who is instructed to reject and/or destroy the feminine in order to overcome their anxieties about growing up and becoming appropriately masculine. Further, Nebbercracker is shown to have been redeemed by admitting his faults and letting DJ take violent action. As a result, he, too, seems to be 'reborn' as a new man. At the film's

denouement Chowder remarks that the newly homeless and single Nebbercracker might go on vacation and meet someone new, 'this time maybe a nice beach house', which all too clearly implies that, now free from the clutches of his possessive and grotesque wife, he will find a younger, more beautiful and more exotic woman.

Finally, just when Chowder seems to accept that they are too old to go trick-or-treating (against his true feelings) DJ reasons with an air of thoughtfulness that they've been working hard and deserve the treat – a 'last hurrah', so to speak. Rather than being a regression back to childhood, the implication is that, no longer split between two homes and having become 'master' of one, the monster house, DJ has escaped the confining status of pubescent childhood and crossed a boundary into a more mature state of being where he does not need to pretend. This is well illustrated by the symbolic gesture, just prior to this exchange, of his returning the toys 'eaten' by the house to the neighbourhood children. Conversely Chowder, upon being told they can go trick-or-treating together, leaps off in a celebratory manner as if the strongest wishes of his id have been granted. Unlike DJ, Chowder is perfectly happy remaining 'stuck' in childhood, not ready to become a man just yet.

Providing an alternate example of what it means to be a 'man' is the arc of Dane in *The Hole*. Like Coraline and the children in *Monster House*, Dane, along with Lucas and Julie, is frequently framed within or near the edges of doors and windows. This is most notably the trap door covering the hole itself, from which their worst fears emerge. Dane can be read as having feelings of both mental and physical unrest due to his being on the cusp between adolescence and adulthood, and being in a new, unfamiliar home. As such his perpetual hovering around the edges of the hole represents his inability to progress from that state of unrest. Dane's arc also concerns his struggling with a particular form of masculine identity, but where DJ desires to be a certain type of 'man' – particularly, one who is rewarded for

violent actions – Dane is fearful of inheriting a violent and abusive masculine identity from his father. This fear invites an Oedipal reading of the film, supported by Dane’s interactions with his brother and mother.

Despite Dane’s attempts to repress feelings and memories concerning his father, the film links the two figures in several ways. They look alike, each with dark brown hair, while Lucas and Susan are both blonde. Dane is also frequently shot in ambiguous ways that imply that he is the monstrous manifestation of his father, most notably in the sequence beginning with Dane finding a note from ‘Mr Thompson’. After Dane reads the note, which says ‘HELLO BOY’, the film cuts to the open hole, then to a low-angle view of the upstairs hallway into which a large pair of male feet enter. The ominous soundtrack, low-key lighting and the preceding shot of the open hole imply that the feet belong to the hole’s manifestation of the father. In another example of the film using slasher-like subjective shots, we then see Lucas sleeping in bed from the perspective of an unknown figure moving slowly forward, accompanied by the sound of footsteps, but who is strongly implied to be ‘Mr Thompson’. Lucas wakes suddenly and looks fearfully at the figure/camera, but a sudden cut reveals that the holder of the gaze is Dane, who has come to warn Lucas that someone is in the house. Other ways that Dane is associated with or mistaken for the father include Julie finding the father’s belt in the basement, an item explicitly associated with his father’s domestic violence in the film, and her asking Dane if it belongs to him.

In relation to this, Dane unknowingly takes on the identity of his father when he threatens or displays violent behaviour toward Lucas. Dane complains to Susan that if he had to spend any more time with Lucas he’d ‘strangle him’, and several times is shown chasing or violently pushing him. It appears that Dane is unwittingly stepping into the shoes of his father – literally so, thanks to the aforementioned shot that implies that Dane’s shoes *are* his father’s. To take this further, there is evidence in the film to suggest that Dane has Oedipal

desires for his own mother. His feelings toward her mirror those concerning his own maturity, as they seem to reveal confusion about whether he desires to be a child dependent on his mother, or to take the place of his father/her husband. This is demonstrated in an early exchange in which Dane asks Susan why she babies Lucas so much. She responds, teasingly, 'Why, are you jealous?', suggesting that on some level Dane *is* jealous of the attention Lucas gets from Susan, though not necessarily in the context of a child being doted on by a mother. Further evidence is clearly displayed during a scene in which Susan brings a male colleague, Dr Newman (Mark Pawson), home for dinner. Dr Newman is figured as a potential step-father to Dane and Lucas, and treats them both like children when he patronisingly asks them if they've been 'playing a little war game' in the basement. Dane, seemingly jealous of the older man and affronted at being spoken to like a child, decides to parody the role of child Dr Newman has assigned to him by responding sarcastically, 'It's past our beddie-bye time, isn't it Mommy Dear?' On the one hand it could simply be construed that Dane is worried that his mother will enter into another abusive relationship, but the context of Dane's fear that he will become his father opens up the possibility that he has repressed sexual desires for his mother. It is also interesting to note that Julie, who represents an alternate and acceptable love interest for Dane, somewhat resembles Susan in that they both have long, blonde hair. This resemblance between the two most important female figures in Dane's life, and the age difference between Lucas, approximately eight-years-old, and teenagers Dane and Julie, has the function of figuring the trio of Dane, Julie and Lucas as a family unit in which Lucas is figured as the child and Dane and Julie as parents. Indeed, while Dane acts as a father toward Lucas – albeit an abusive and ineffectual one – Julie shows motherly tendencies toward him. They are visually constructed as a family unit on one notable occasion when Susan is at work, and the children stand guard at the mouth of the hole using their paintball guns, with Dane and Julie constructed as the authoritative guardians and Lucas as their 'child' (Figure 5.31). When Susan returns home to find them

asleep in a heap, a low-angle shot showing her towering above them on the stairs refigures them as children playing a game in the presence of a proper adult (Figure 5.32).

The rising to the surface of Dane's abusive actions and Oedipal desires, which have root in a traumatic childhood experience, are uncanny in that they can be categorised as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (Freud, 1919: 124-25). Bronfen's approach is again applicable here, in that the takeover of Dane's identity by that of his father can be described as his ego 'not feeling master in its own house' (2004: 22), tying in with Dane's feeling that he does not feel 'at home' within the house the family have moved into. It is with this that the structure of the home can be likened to Dane's psyche. As referenced earlier, Žižek reads the structure of the Bates home in *Psycho* as representing the three levels of Norman's psyche, with the basement being the id, the 'reservoir' of repressed material. *Psycho* and *The Hole* share the central thematic concern of a figure having their own identity being taken over by that of a parent, resulting from these figures repressing traumatic events concerning those parents. We may therefore read the structure of the house in *The Hole* in the same way, in which the basement, and specifically the hole that is within it, represents Dane's id, the location of his repressed memories and feelings. Dane spends most of the film denying that he has any fears and refusing to acknowledge that he is scared of becoming an abusive patriarch like his father. Despite his efforts, both he and the house become 'haunted' by the repressed psychic images from within the hole/his subconscious. Dane is shown drawing in a sketchbook several times, and when observed closely it is clear that Dane is drawing a scene resembling the dreamscape inside of the hole that he later enters to confront his father, i.e. a nightmarish version of the neighbourhood of his childhood where he and his family were abused (Figure 5.33). The only way for Dane to clear his subconscious of the problematic memories and feelings concerning his father is for him to enter the hole/his subconscious and confront them. This can be considered in Freudian terms the 'psychoanalytic cure' which

‘consists in making the subject take notice of traumatic knowledge that it seeks to repress’ (Bronfen, 2004: 22).

In finally venturing into the hole, Dane joins Coraline and DJ in crossing transgressive boundaries, and in doing so graduates to a new level of maturity. This is despite the somewhat paradoxical fact that he has to return to childhood in order to progress from this same state. Similarly to DJ’s pretence at being ‘grown-up’, the very act of which signifies his immaturity, Dane’s denial of having any fears just serves to show that he is not brave or mature enough to admit that he does. Also like Coraline and DJ, and in line with Doane’s exploration of the doorway in the 1940s woman’s Gothic film, in crossing this doorway Dane finally encounters, face to face, his ‘other’: a specific form of violent male identity that he will ultimately reject in favour of a non-violent one. In this way, Dane avoids the fate of *Psycho*’s Norman, who completely succumbs to the identity of his deceased mother. Dane’s confrontation and rejection of his father’s identity also changes the context of the basement, which contains the entrance to the hole. Scott Martin reads the use of basements in comedy films as performative spaces that ‘[aid] the characters’ affirmative transformation of their long-held desires’ (2016: 46). In this context, the basement becomes a space of ‘self-expression and flexibility’ (ibid.: 55), and of ‘mental release rather than entrapment’ (Andrews et al, 2016: 14). Although *The Hole* is a horror film, not a comedy as per the films in Martin’s reading, Dane’s experience inside of the hole/basement can be read similarly.

The mise-en-scène inside of the hole is particularly interesting. Dane lands in the centre of a recreation of his past neighbourhood, and then climbs through a window into his former home. As a representation of Dane’s subconscious fears which stem from childhood trauma, it is highly distorted: ‘twisted and warped, with strange design that forces perspective and manipulates object size, giving the impression that Dane sees these environs from the vantage point of a child’ (Weetch, 2013: 376) (Figure 5.34). Drawing upon the work

of Higgins, cited above in relation to the contrast in size between Constance and Nebbercracker in *Monster House*, Weetch notes that in *The Hole* 3D brings Dane out into negative parallax while his surroundings stretch out into depth beyond the screen plane. Dane's emergence out of the screen makes him appear closer in proximity to the audience, therefore making him seem even smaller than he does in the 2D version of the film (ibid.: 397). By figuring Dane as a small child, the set design and use of 3D enhance his vulnerability, while the set's almost monochromatic colour palette of dull blue, black and grey give it a nightmarish quality. This aesthetic emulates that of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which effectively uses the German Expressionist style to function as an 'outward projection of the

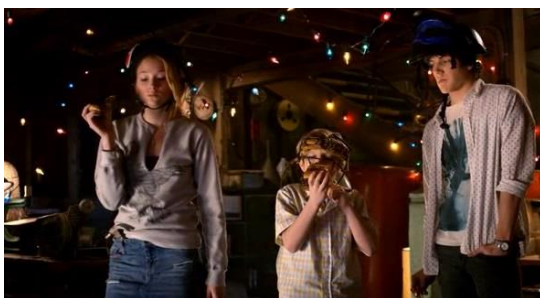


Figure 5.31: Dane, Julie and Lucas form a family unit.



Figure 5.32: Dane, Julie and Lucas are refigured as children when Susan returns home.



Figure 5.33: Dane drawing what appears to be the dreamscape inside of the hole.



Figure 5.34: Inside the hole's nightmarish impression of Dane's former home.



Figure 5.35: The monstrous 'Mr Thompson'.



Figure 5.36: 'Mr Thompson' returns to human form once it has lost its power over Dane.

psyche of someone interred at an asylum' (ibid.: 377), hence its appropriateness for representing the traumatic depths of Dane's unconscious mind. The distortion inside the hole is also apparent in many of the smaller decorative objects in this environment, most significantly the family photographs on the walls. In each of them the face of the father is warped, which may reflect both Dane's attempts to repress his memories of his father, and that Dane considers him to be a frightening, almost inhuman figure. Indeed, the version of the father that the hole conjures is a monstrous giant, with pale grey-green skin, straggly black hair, is shot from a low-angle to emphasise his height, and lit from behind to obscure his facial features (Figure 5.35). Sound design is also put to excellent effect in order to enhance the terror that this figure incites in Dane: in addition to his deep, rough voice which sounds as if it has been distorted in post-production, 'Mr Thompson' drops his belt buckle and it crashes to the floor with an almighty clang.

The motif of the belt is crucial to Dane's choice of one type of male identity over another, a choice that is the inverse of *Monster House's* endorsement of violent masculinity. Dane and Lucas have suffered at the hands of their father's violent tendencies, and it has affected Dane to the extent that he feels implicit in the abuse. It is revealed that Dane allowed his younger brother to be beaten in his place, resulting in Lucas' arm being broken. As glimpses of Dane taking on his father's identity are seen in him showing similarly violent tendencies toward Lucas, Dane vanquishing his fear of his father must rely on him *rejecting* the use of violence. The film closely ties fear and violence, as Dane realises that the reason for his father's abusive behaviour was due to being afraid of what other people would think of him for his drinking problem, which is hinted at throughout the film. As violence is shown to be an ineffective way to tackle fear, Dane refuses to use these same methods to defeat his fear of his father. As the scene progresses the landscape around Dane and his 'father' begins to crumble into nothingness, a literal representation of Dane's fears crumbling away. When 'Mr Thompson' lashes out at Dane with the belt, asking 'Do I look scared to you?',



Dane snatches it and retorts, 'Do I?' He then begins to swing the belt around his head like a lasso, leading 'Mr Thompson' to think that Dane will strike him with it. He taunts Dane with the idiom 'Like father, like son' before lunging at him, but Dane hooks the belt onto the electric fan above his head and pulls himself to safety. The 'father', close to defeat, now looks like an ordinary and unthreatening human rather than the monstrous version of Dane's imagination (Figure 5.36). Dane's final blow is in the form of the words 'I am nothing like you'. This acknowledgement causes the floor to fall away, taking his 'father' with it.

Dane climbs out of the hole and is embraced by Lucas and Julie. The hole is now simply a shallow pit underneath the house, signifying that they have succeeded in confronting and vanquishing their worst fears. In having finally acknowledged and defeated the fear of his father, thus rejecting the specifically violent form of male identity that the father embodied, Dane is free of any violent tendencies in himself. However, rather than this signifying that Dane has now crossed into adulthood, the film seems to imply the opposite. The film closes with Susan returning home and asking what the children have been up to. 'Just screwin' around', says Dane with an air of nonchalance. They then decide to go and play basketball outside. Where before Dane refused to play with his brother and showed jealousy towards his mother's colleague, he seems happy to partake in a family game and see Susan as *just* a mother. Rather than having fully entered adulthood, therefore, Dane is free to live out the rest of his adolescent years without being plagued by the fear of what type of adult he is going to become.

### Conclusion

At the ends of these three films, the protagonists are suggested to have overcome feelings of uncanniness and uncertainty with their own identities that were preventing them from feeling truly 'at home', whether with themselves or within the literal structures of their

houses. However, Bronfen argues that even films that present 'the successful achievement of a sense of being at home' cannot fully erase 'the traumatic core of dislocation' that all people experience at least on a subconscious level (2004: 21). This thesis argues that children's horror films display through frightening fantasy scenarios ways in which children can be brave, resourceful, and canny enough to overcome fear, and thus construct a child viewer who is reassured that they can apply this logic to their own lives. The texts concerning the home discussed in this chapter specifically address pertinent worries and dangers concerning the home and family that may resonate with the assumed child viewers. Given the potentially therapeutic benefit of showing children how to deal with these fears, and that the 'happy ending' is considered a crucial element of children's horror films, it might therefore be considered very troubling if, as argued by Bronfen, these films presented only an 'ambivalent' cure for unhappiness that recognises a lingering trauma (ibid.: 78). To do so would also align with Furedi's pessimistic claim that '[i]t is not hope but fear that excites the cultural imagination of the early twenty-first century' (2006: vii).

With that being said, if we consider the endings of this chapter's case studies, Bronfen's claims may be applicable after all. *Coraline* locks the door to the Other home and throws the key, and Other Mother's hand with it, down a well. Rather than having truly vanquished Other Mother, then, there is still the possibility that she may return and claim more victims. *The Hole* ends with Lucas asking Susan what her worst fear is. When she answers that when she was a little girl she feared a monster under her bed, the trap door suddenly swings open and the camera dives within, implying that now *she* will have to defeat her worst fear in order to re-seal the hole. As the endings of *Coraline* and *The Hole* can be read as somewhat open-ended, it is possible that Coraline and Dane have not truly defeated their fears but have simply repressed them once more, leaving open the possibility for these fears to haunt them again. Arguably, however, this is not the case. Rather than their fears being ignored and shut away in the depths of their minds, Coraline and Dane seem to still be

aware that those dangers exist. Importantly, not only are they aware of them, but they now possess the knowledge and bravery to defeat them, should they return.

A useful example of an adult horror film that articulates of the 'benefit' of knowingly repressing fears or unsavoury feelings is the 2014 Australian film *The Babadook*. Like *The Hole*, *Monster House* and *Psycho*, the threat that haunts the protagonist, Amelia (Essie Davis), is located in the basement. This threat, the eponymous babadook, can be interpreted as a phantasmic manifestation of memories and feelings that Amelia refuses to acknowledge and confront. These have root in a traumatic event in which her husband (Ben Winspear) was killed in a car crash on the day she gave birth to their son, Sam (Noah Wiseman). Six years later Sam has behavioural issues and an obsession with monsters, and Amelia, suffering from severe depression and sleep deprivation, struggles to cope. She also appears to resent Sam due to the circumstances of his birth being associated with the death of her husband. Over the course of the film, Amelia sees apparitions of the babadook with increasing frequency in line with her mental deterioration, and she even seems to want to harm her son. The film climaxes with a confrontation in which Amelia becomes possessed by the babadook, but she fights it off and warns it not to harm her son ever again. The babadook retreats into the basement in which Amelia traps it. A few days later Amelia and Sam are shown to be perfectly happy; they occasionally go into the basement to 'feed' the babadook a diet of worms, which functions as a bonding exercise for them. As in *The Hole*, the basement was once a site of repressed material but becomes a space of acknowledgement and transformation of those repressed feelings. In accepting her feelings, and by extension the presence of the babadook, Amelia is able to come to terms with and overcome them. This aligns with the Lacanian psychoanalytic belief, which Bronfen draws upon in her own work, that 'one is well advised to love one's symptom as one loves oneself, for by not doing so one runs the risk of becoming insane' (Bronfen, 2004: 78). That the babadook remains at the end of the film is therefore a positive resolution that allows Amelia to function normally.

The endings of *Coraline* and *The Hole* can similarly be read as conveying the importance of acknowledgement and acceptance of unsavoury feelings, as represented in these films by the hole and Other Mother, in order to move past them and retain the ability to tackle them if they were to rear their heads once more. In this way, despite their being horror films, *Coraline* and *The Hole* refute Furedi's claim that fear trumps hope in twenty-first century culture. Rather, they align more closely with Babbitt's far more optimistic view that children's stories, even if they do not end wholly 'happily', should at least end with 'something which turns a story ultimately toward hope rather than resignation' (1970: 7).

*Monster House*, unlike *Coraline* and *The Hole*, does not end with any suggestion that the evil might return. Rather, it is clear that Constance has been completely destroyed. However, as argued above this is the most problematic of the three films. Not only does it paint a transgressive female identity as monstrous and in need of destruction, but it also pays no heed to *why* she was monstrous. We know that Constance died, and was so cruel towards children in her house form, because she was taunted by trick-or-treating children for being fat. Although DJ, Chowder and Jenny were not implicated in these actions, nowhere in the film is it suggested that the offending children were in the wrong for their bullying behaviour. 'They're just children', Nebbercracker tells his wife. This inverts the treatment of 'monstrous' children discussed in Chapter Three, and it is suspect that in *Monster House* the children's naughty behaviour is accepted because it is targeted at a monstrous and transgressive female figure, rather than at patriarchal figures of authority, as in *Gremlins*. As argued above, *Coraline's* depiction of Other Mother is also concerning. These films therefore appear to prescribe 'beneficial' lessons to a child audience of address on how to deal with their own fears. This aligns with Bettelheim's thesis that 'fairy tales depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence' (1976: 73). Yet, the lessons that these children's horror films teach regarding gender and sexuality may be the most frightening of all.

## Conclusion

### The Possibility (and Possibilities) of Children's Horror

This thesis has brought academic attention to a previously neglected area of Film Studies, the children's horror film. It has provided a brief history of how horror films for children emerged in Hollywood cinema and detailed the key characteristics of contemporary children's horror films. The most significant of these are: that they are told from the perspective of one or more child protagonists in a contemporary setting, and address the fears and desires of these protagonists; this setting is invaded by a supernatural monster; adult characters are either absent, unable to help, ignorant of the supernatural force, or they *are* the supernatural force, leaving the child protagonists with the power and agency to defeat it. This thesis has also identified how children's horror films draw upon narrative structures, iconography, imagery and formal and aesthetic strategies associated with the horror genre and combine these with alleviating and distancing strategies in order to prevent them from becoming too 'horrific' to be considered suitable for children. The key alleviating and distancing strategies are the avoidance of extreme violence, gore and 'realistic' monsters (e.g. serial killers), and the use of comedy, animation and music to 'lessen' moments that may have the potential to be too frightening. Finally, elements such as the evocation of disgust highlight the fact that in many ways horror is inherently childish, and therefore completely suited to being addressed to a child audience. Thus, despite the perceived unsuitability or impossibility of horror for children, it can in fact be entirely *suitable* as well as *possible*.

This thesis has addressed some of the key thematic areas of children's horror films and examined how these are presented through the cinematic language of horror to evoke

both fear and pleasure. It has demonstrated that the children's horror films discussed throughout present ordinary child protagonists who face their fears, anxieties and desires in the form of a monstrous 'other' – such as a doppelganger of one's mother who stands in for separation anxiety or wicked witches who stand in for desires to attain an identity of masculine maturity – and in the process, overcome them and emerge better prepared to deal with life ahead. In so doing, these films address a model child viewer and seek to show them 'that dark things can be beaten' and that they, too, have the power to beat them (Neil Gaiman in TOON Books, 2014).

However, these examinations also reveal that, for as much as children's horror films may pertain to be *for* children, they also frequently appear to draw upon the fears, anxieties and desires of adults. The texts discussed in Chapter Three, for example, draw upon the monstrous child trope which is common in adult horror films. I have argued that these monstrous child characters can be read as providing subversive pleasure for the model child viewer in their unruly behaviour. Conversely, they can also function as cathartic, as 'monstrous' children like *ParaNorman's* Norman demonstrate how the model child viewer can work through and accept their own 'monstrous' qualities. However, that the monstrous child characters are either destroyed (the gremlins), rendered safe (*The Little Vampire's* Rudolph) or are not particularly monstrous to begin with (*ParaNorman's* Norman, *Hotel Transylvania's* Mavis and Dennis), indicates that these texts also function to alleviate adult fears *of* children and seek to control and socialise children into displaying acceptable behaviour. Norman, for example, is not destroyed or tamed only because he is able to use his 'monstrous' ability to converse with the dead in a way that is beneficial to the film's adult representatives of the 'norm'. This aligns with Rose's core argument that children's fiction presents an idyllic view of childhood with the aim of shaping the child reader/viewer into matching this ideal, therefore actually serving the needs and desires of adults more than those of children (1984). Thus, children's horror retains an element of impossibility.

Similarly, Chapters Four and Five argued that the presentations of powerful, transgressive women as evil monsters to be destroyed in *The Witches*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Monster House* and *Coraline* appear to target adult male fears of women and female sexuality more than the fears of children. While the children in these films go through positive experiences in which they face their fears and emerge more mature, independent and self-assured (which demonstrates to the model child viewer that they, too, can receive these benefits by facing their fears), I have questioned the troubling ideas that the child characters/viewers may also come away with, particularly regarding regressive attitudes about 'appropriate' masculinity, femininity, female sexuality and gender norms.

The children's horror film therefore consists of various pairs of opposing dichotomies: the possible and the impossible, the regressive and the progressive, the didactic and the subversive, the child as symbol of both innocence and anarchy. Children's horror films share this quality with each of the genres of which they are made up: children's fiction/fairy tales and the horror genre. With regards to children's fiction, Tatar writes that contemporary authors have attempted to eschew the heavily didactic nature of nineteenth century children's literature, seeing themselves as 'conspiring with children' rather than trying to educate and socialise them (1992: xvi-xvii). However, Tatar notes that authors are still unable to completely shake off the expectation that children's stories must have a pedagogic or beneficial element. For example, in empathising with children, authors 'are often at pains to help them work through problems by providing cathartic pleasures that, in the end, will turn them into "well-adjusted" (read: "socialized and productive") adults' (ibid.: xvii). Tatar could easily be referring to the films discussed in this thesis. In relation to fairy tales and horror, director Guillermo del Toro is of the view that

[m]uch like fairy tales, there are two facets of horror. One is pro-institution, which is the most reprehensible type of fairy tale: Don't wander into the woods,

and always obey your parents. The other type of fairy tale is completely anarchic and antiestablishment [*sic*] (in Cruz, 2011)

This acknowledges that horror and fairy tales/children's fiction can be politically charged, although it is a rather simplistic and reductive view that sees didacticism and anarchy as mutually exclusive binaries that cannot exist within the same narrative. As discussed throughout this thesis in relation to children's horror films, which owe their lineage equally to fairy tales and horror films, it is entirely possible for a text to offer children anarchic pleasures as well as provide them with 'therapeutic' benefits and/or socialise them into well-adjusted, functioning members of society. Indeed, this is one of the functions of the horror genre as outlined in Chapter Two: to appeal to and satisfy the 'beast' that resides within us in order to prevent it from rising to the surface and running amok. *The Monster Squad* exemplifies this duality of the children's horror film by showing children who revel in transgressive behaviour such as swearing, watching horror and using weapons, but who are also good-willed, moral children who are more able than adults to save humanity. In being both didactic and anarchic, coercive and subversive, or simply fence-sitting, children's horror films are both typical examples of both the fairy tale and the horror film, and they demonstrate their ability to be both 'possible' and 'impossible' at once.

On the subject of possibility, this Conclusion closes by considering further avenues for research that arise out of this thesis. Here I have provided a detailed analysis of horror films that are both addressed to and about children in US cinema from the 1980s onwards. This may lead to productive discussions of areas such as children's horror films in other national contexts and the proliferation of horror in other areas of children's media culture, for example television, direct-to-DVD films, online content, video games and toys. One interesting example of a franchise that spans all of these media platforms, and more, is *Monster High*.



### 'Freaky just got fabulous!': monstrosity as catharsis and alternative femininity in Monster High

The Monster High franchise, launched in 2010, is best known as a collection of fashion dolls aimed at a female child demographic. Each doll, or character, is based on a famous monster from horror, science-fiction or fantasy lore. It is also a multi-platform franchise that spans web content, mobile apps, accessories, clothing, video games, magazines, and animated films released online, on television and on DVD. A live-action theatrical film is currently in development, and the popularity of Monster High has spawned several imitators, such as *Once Upon a Zombie* – a web series and line of dolls modelled after iconic fairy tale heroines, who also happen to be zombies.

Some of the core Monster High dolls/characters are Frankie Stein (the daughter of Frankenstein's Monster), Clawdeen Wolf (a werewolf) and Draculaura (the daughter of Count Dracula) (Figure 6.1). The overarching narrative of the franchise (told through the films, comic strips in the magazines and the 'diaries' that come with each doll) is that the girls, known within the diegesis as 'ghouls', study at Monster High where amongst their day-to-day activities they solve mysteries and tackle supernatural threats to the school. Due to the monstrous identities of the ghouls, the franchise also represents the 'horrifying'



Figure 6.1: Some Monster High dolls from left to right: Draculaura, Frankie Stein and Clawdeen (Mattel, n.d.).

experience of being a teenage girl through Gothic imagery. This is very interesting in relation to body image. In the first of the Monster High films, *New Ghoul at School* (Paden and Radomski, 2010), Frankie Stein is the newest student at Monster High, having only been 'created' sixteen days earlier. Frankie's 'monstrosities' include having eyes of different colours, pale green skin, bolts in her neck and that parts of her body are stitched together. The narrative sees her attempting to make friends and fit in, but she is hindered by her body. For example, she fails to gain a place on the 'fear-leading' squad when one of her stitched-on feet comes off mid-routine. Her foot flies through the air and lands in a cup, coating the most popular ghoul in the school with a sticky, pink liquid. The viewer may derive enjoyment as well as comfort and catharsis in viewing an experience they recognise (i.e. the mortification of one's body misbehaving in front of one's peers) play out in exaggerated and fantastical means, and seeing the protagonist successfully overcome it. By the end of the film Frankie succeeds in making friends by being herself and playing to her strengths, in the process learning that Monster High is 'not so scary' after all. This positive message is theoretically conveyed to the viewer. Like the children's horror films discussed throughout this thesis, and fairy tales before them, Monster High can therefore be read as having a beneficial function for child viewers.

Yet, like the children's horror films discussed here, the Monster High franchise can also be criticised on a number of points. As indicated by the discussion so far, the franchise is rife with puns – in the names of characters (e.g. Abbey Bominable), the titles of films (e.g. *Frights, Camera, Action!* [Lau and Blais, 2014]), while characters' dialogue is littered with words such as '*fangtastic*', '*goregeous*' and '*axecessorize*'. By fusing horror with glamour like this, it becomes normalised and domesticated. The franchise might therefore be considered the peak of 'safe' horror in children's culture that has been derided by Newman, and as exemplifying what Botting disparagingly terms 'girly-girly Gothic' (2007: 207). In relation to this, the most heavily criticised aspect of the franchise is that its focus on glamour, beauty

and fashion supposedly presents unhealthy attitudes toward female body image. Indeed, despite being monsters by definition, with their heavily made-up, glamorous appearances they do not look particularly monstrous. The whole franchise is extremely fashion-conscious, as a major function of the franchise's primary product, the dolls, is the ability to dress them up in various outfits. Within the films, characters gush over their own and each other's clothes and made-over appearances, which the viewer (or viewer's parent) can buy in shops as, in conjunction with the release of each film, all of the core doll characters are re-launched with outfits matching those in the newest film.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the new outfits cannot be purchased separately, but only with the corresponding doll. What might be considered the most 'monstrous' about the franchise is therefore its emphasis on commercialism, on owning fashion commodities, and the sexualised clothing and unnaturally thin figures of the ghouls.

It is therefore unsurprising that the franchise has attracted feminist criticism. Acknowledging that the franchise contains some positive elements, such as the slogan's encouragement to 'Be yourself! Be unique! Be a monster!', Peggy Orenstein points out that 'those positive traits come wrapped in a very particular package that encourages girls from a very young age to define their femininity in the most superficial, narcissistic ways' (2011). For Laura Bates, *Monster High* is emblematic of the troubling segregation of children's toys into boys and girls sections, where girls' toys are focused on fashion and beauty, and boys' toys on creativity, action and adventure (2014: 86-93). This worryingly insidious practice denies girls access to scientific and adventurous toys and restricts their ideas about what career paths are open to them. Bates concludes, 'Monster High is supposed to be a horror story. I'm just not sure its creators realize just how well they've succeeded' (ibid.: 92).

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<sup>1</sup> This experience is also replicated in online games on [www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com) and through mobile apps such as 'Frightful Fashions'.

Feminist criticisms levelled at Monster High echo those that have been targeted at Barbie for decades – and in fact, Monster High and Barbie are both products of the Mattel toy manufacturer. The key problems with Barbie are summarised by Kim Toffoletti:

Barbie is said to teach girls the codes of femininity through standards of dress, bodily ideas and modes of behaviour. She is rigid and slender, always smiling and immaculately groomed and attired, mostly in pink. [...] girls learn that in order to be successful and popular women, just like Barbie, they must look good. (2007: 60)

Others have studied specific Barbie products in closer detail. Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey, analysing *Barbie* magazine, argues that in ‘train[ing] girls to become perfect consumers of beautifying commodities’ it functions as a ‘preparatory text’ for teen and adult fashion magazines, or ‘manuals for particular kinds of training in femininity’ (1994: 23). Judy Attfield has compared the number of joints of Barbie dolls to the male equivalent targeted at boys, Action Man. She argues that the greater number of joints on the Action Man doll allows it complex possibilities of movement, while the simplicity and minimal number of joints on Barbie ‘suggests the priority given to posing rather than action’ (1996: 82).<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the unhealthy body image promoted by Barbie, Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund scaled Barbie to the height of an average adult female, which revealed that, were a woman to exist with Barbie’s bodily proportions, they would be ‘clinically anorectic [*sic*]’ (1995: 297).<sup>3</sup>

Although *some* of this is applicable to Monster High – the unrealistic bodily proportions of the dolls, the magazine’s encouragement of consumerism and hegemonic ideals of femininity at a young age – a lot of it is not. Where Barbie is ‘always smiling’ and

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the years, Mattel have released dolls within the Barbie brand with more joints and possibilities of movement than the standard Barbies, such as the recent ‘Made to Move’ doll. However, these dolls are always anomalies among the wealth of ‘normal’ Barbies with fewer joints.

<sup>3</sup> Mattel have recently responded to these criticisms by launching a new line of dolls called ‘Barbie Fashionistas’ with varied body shapes and sizes: Curvy, Petite, Tall and Original. While this is inarguably a step forward, it still restricts the female body into just four types which remain hegemonically ‘beautiful’ and highly glamorous and fashion-conscious.

attired mostly in pink, for example on the cover of *Barbie* magazine (Figure 6.2), the colour palette of *Monster High* magazine is dominated by black with highlights of bold, bright colours, the characters pose and pout like catwalk models, and more ‘horrific’ puns (e.g. ‘creepstastic’) adorn the cover (Figure 6.3). The *Monster High* dolls also have a far greater range of movement than Barbie dolls, as unlike Barbie they have joints that enable them to bend at the knees, elbows and wrists, thus enabling more ‘active’ play than the passivity of Barbie as noted by Attfield. Some dolls are also given embellishments depending on what type of monster they are: Frankie’s hand is detachable, and the steampunk robot Rebecca Steam’s bronze-coloured skin is covered in rivets. Therefore rather than being *like* Barbie, we can see the *Monster High* dolls as in fact being monstrous ‘others’ to Barbie’s ‘norm’, and may function as an attractive, ‘edgy’ alternative to children (or parents of children) who are put off by Barbie’s overt girlishness. The theme of monstrosity as ‘otherness’ and alternative femininity is directly invited by the franchise as it is dealt with in the film *Ghoulz Rule!* (Fetterly and Sacks, 2012). This film introduces a group of characters known as ‘normies’:



Figure 6.2: The cover of Barbie magazine (issue 315).



Figure 6.3: The cover of Monster High magazine (issue 28).

'normal' human beings who are prejudiced against monsters and wish to destroy them. One of the normies, the slim and blonde Lilith, is very similar to a Barbie doll in appearance. By the end of the film, all conflicts are resolved when the ghouls and normies realise that, despite their contrasting outward appearances, they 'are more alike than [they] are different'.

Unfortunately it is not possible within the space of this Conclusion to perform a detailed analysis of the Monster High franchise. There are enough products spanning a range of media to warrant a long-form study on this particular area, particularly the complex interplay between horror, glamour and femininity. For now, this short analysis demonstrates that my arguments about the children's horror film are applicable to a wide range of other children's media. The Monster High franchise can be read as a positive and cathartic space for (female) child consumers to experience relatable anxieties concerning the body, adolescence and identity through humour and horrific imagery, as is displayed by Frankie's unfortunate 'fear-leading' audition in *New Ghoul at School*. Further, if considered the 'other' to Barbie, Monster High potentially allows children to experiment with alternative forms of feminine identity and gain a form of subversive pleasure through interactions with monstrosity. Like children's horror films, however, Monster High is also a cause for concern given its potentially harmful presentation of the female body and its emphases on fashion, consumerism and glamour. This is particularly troubling in light of research which shows that 'girls exposed to sexualising and objectifying media', including fashion dolls, 'are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem' (Zurbriggen et al, 2007: 34).

Recalling the discussion of *Gremlins* in Chapter Three, Monster High's vast array of transmedia products reminds us of the important role of paratexts in the construction of a text's meaning. In relation to Monster High, where the dolls present one message, the films,

mobile apps or magazines may present a conflicting one, and taken together they may say something else altogether. Paratexts are particularly interesting to consider in relation to children's media culture, where films and television programmes are frequently based on a toy or vice versa, and the boundaries between primary texts and paratexts become increasingly blurred. The 'meaning' of a text may therefore change drastically depending on which text, or combination of texts of a particular franchise a child has encountered, in what order, and how the child engages with them. In relation to this, the role of adult parents and guardians as mediators of children's media consumption, and what effect this has on how children interpret it, is an area worthy of further interrogation, particularly in relation to children's consumption of horror.

### The Absent Children of Children's Horror

What this Conclusion is dancing around, once again, is the 'impossibility' of children's fiction and the inherent flaw with 'thinking of the children', which this thesis has also not escaped: that the opinions, feelings and viewing habits of actual children are so often missing from the study of children's audio-visual media. Without consulting with actual children, we cannot know whether the things that children's horror films *present* as frightening or pleasurable are *actually* frightening or pleasurable to most child viewers. As detailed in Chapter One, a number of strategies are used in order to prevent children's horror films from becoming too horrific, such as the use of supernatural horror over realistic horror and the use of comedy and/or animation to lessen any elements that may be too disturbing, or which err too close to realism. Factors such as this are taken into account by film classification boards in deciding what is and is not 'suitable' for children. The question is whether these distancing strategies actually work to lessen the fear and unease that children may have. Empirical research on children's viewing of frightening media reveals that '[s]ome of the

common stereotyped ideas about what frightens children have little foundation in fact' (Himmelweit et al, 1958: 209-10). The surprising citation of *Moomin* as frightening by the child respondents in the studies of both Buckingham (1996: 104) and Lemish and Alon-Tirosh (2014: 147) attests to this.

The discrepancies between what adults assume children find frightening and what children actually find frightening is interesting to consider in relation to stop-motion animation, which is an increasingly commonly used medium for children's (and family) horror films thanks to the efforts of Tim Burton (director of *Frankenweenie*, *Corpse Bride* and producer of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*), Henry Selick (director of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Coraline*) and Laika (the studio behind *Coraline* and *ParaNorman*). As discussed in Chapter One, animation can be considered to mitigate horror. Yet whether children actually find horror presented in stop-motion animation less frightening than horror presented in live-action or other forms of animation is questionable. Much of the critical discourse surrounding stop-motion animation reads it as an 'uncanny' medium due to it producing the illusion of inanimate objects seeming to move on their own and its often stilted quality of movement (Brown, 1998; Zamir, 2010; Gross, 2011; Sheehan, 2012). Moseley, however, argues in relation to British stop-motion animated children's television programmes that their clear address to a child audience, the familiarity of their 'toytown' settings and the use of toy-like figures (e.g. in *Camberwick Green* [BBC, 1966]), or their hand-made aesthetic (e.g. in *The Clangers* [BBC, 1969-74]) prevents them from becoming uncanny (2016: 99). This argument draws from Freud's proposition in his essay on the uncanny that, when playing, children are more likely to wish for their dolls to come to life than to find this a frightening prospect (1919: 141).

Moseley is right to question the popular classification of stop-motion as inherently uncanny, particularly in relation to the children's television texts of her study. However, I



argue that the generic context of the stop-motion children's horror films listed above means that they certainly *can* be considered uncanny. This effect is arguably enhanced in stop-motion children's horror films that are thematically concerned with ghosts and the resurrection of the dead (e.g. *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman*) and have a particularly 'quirky' or eerie aesthetic. This is particularly effective in relation to the literally skeletal Other Mother in *Coraline*, for example, whose unnaturally slender, spiky body contrasts greatly with the soft-bodied and familiar toy-like characters of the programmes of Moseley's discussion. Given these elements, and that empirical research finds that children are very often frightened by 'things which are uncanny and fantastic and resemble nightmares' as much as they are frightened by realistic situations (Himmelweit et al, 1958: 209), it is possible that stop-motion may undo the mitigating effect that the animated medium is often assumed to have in relation to horror. Stop-motion may therefore be a powerful and subversive tool allowing children's horror films to evoke strong feelings of fear without utilising methods such as extreme intensity, gore and violence that are typically considered 'unsuitable' for children and which would usually result in a restrictive classification. This intriguing relationship between horror, stop-motion and the uncanny, and the ramifications this has for the production, classification and reception of children's horror films, cannot be fully addressed here but is an avenue worthy of further exploration.

A further disconnect between adults' assumptions of what children can handle and what children are actually capable of dealing with is the notion that children's horror should avoid displaying 'realistic' horror and violence because it will be too distressing. This is indicated to be baseless if we turn to a rare example of horror fiction that is created *by* children *for* children. *Dare You? A Gothic Anthology by Gifted Young Writers* (ed. Cubitt, 2013) consists of horror stories written by children where the horror ranges from the supernatural to the 'realistic', and bloody gore and violence that would almost certainly result in a restrictive film rating (such as hearts being ripped from chests and child

protagonists being threatened by knife-wielding maniacs) is a common occurrence. There are clearly major differences between the literary and filmic forms, including the extent to which they are subject to classification and censorship and whether the audio-visual medium makes horror more or less frightening. Even so, this collection, which sadly seems to be an anomaly, confronts adults with the uncomfortable truth that many children are far more 'blood-thirsty' than adults would like to believe – but that this not a cause for concern as long as the satiation of this thirst only occurs through the consumption of fiction. It is also possible that the assumption that children's horror should not be too 'realistic' functions, at least in part, to provide adult guardians with an easy way to comfort distressed children. For example, if a child is frightened by the ghosts and zombies in *ParaNorman*, an adult can easily point out that ghosts and zombies do not exist in reality, and that the child is therefore safe. An adult would not be able to make the same reassurance about much of the 'realistic' horror seen in adult horror films. This is purely speculation, but if it were found to be the case it would prove that thinking of the children, once again, fails to actually think of the children.

This thesis has uncovered what it is that children's horror films, as constructions by adults for children, think that children are, or should be, scared of. Three key questions remain: What do children think about children's horror films? What would children's horror films look like if they were made by children? And what could we, as adults who are perpetually 'thinking of the children', learn from this?

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## Filmography

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*Alice in Wonderland*, 1903. Directed by Cecil M. Hepworth and Percy Stow. UK: Hepworth.

*Alien*, 1979. Directed by Ridley Scott. USA/UK: Brandywine Productions and Twentieth Century-Fox.

*Alvin and the Chipmunks Meet Frankenstein*, 1999. Directed by Kathi Castillo. USA: Universal Cartoon Studios.

*The Amityville Horror*, 1979. Directed by Stuart Rosenberg. USA: American International Pictures.

*Avatar*, 2009. Directed by James Cameron. UK/USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

*The Babadook*, 2014. Directed by Jennifer Kent. Australia/Canada: Causeway Films.

*Batman Returns*, 1992. Directed by Tim Burton. USA/UK: Warner Bros. and PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

*Believe*, 2000. Directed by Robert Tinnell. Canada: Lions Gate Films and Melenny Productions.

*The Black Hole*, 1979. Directed by Gary Nelson. USA: Walt Disney Productions.

*Blue Velvet*, 1986. Directed by David Lynch. USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group.

*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967. Directed by Arthur Penn. USA: Warner Bros.-Seven Arts.

*The Boxtrolls*, 2014. Directed by Graham Annable and Anthony Stacchi. USA: Laika Entertainment.

*Bright Eyes*, 1934. Directed by David Butler. USA: Fox Film Corporation.

*Carrie*, 1976. Directed by Brian De Palma. USA: Red Bank Films.

*The Children*, 2008. Directed by Tom Shankland. UK: Vertigo Films.

*Child's Play 3*, 1991. Directed by Jack Bender. UK/USA: Universal Pictures.

*Coraline*, 2009. Directed by Henry Selick. USA: Focus Features and Laika Entertainment.

*Corpse Bride*, 2005. Directed by Tim Burton and Mike Johnson. UK/USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920. Directed by Robert Wiene. Germany: Decla Film-Gesellschaft – Berlin.

*Dracula*, 1931. Directed by Tod Browning. USA: Universal Pictures.

*E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, 1982. Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Universal Pictures.

*El orfanato/The Orphanage*, 2007. Directed by J. A. Bayona. Spain: Wild Bunch.

- The Exorcist*, 1973. Directed by William Friedkin. USA: Warner Bros.
- Fatal Attraction*, 1987. Directed by Adrian Lyne. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Frankenstein*, 1931. Directed by James Whale. USA: Universal Pictures Corp.
- Frankenstein and Me*, 1996. Directed by Robert Tinnell. Canada: Téléfilm Canada.
- Frankenweenie*, 1984. Directed by Tim Burton. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Frankenweenie*, 2012. Directed by Tim Burton. USA: Walt Disney Productions and Tim Burton Productions.
- Gaslight*, 1944. Directed by George Cukor. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- The Gate*, 1987. Directed by Tibor Takács. USA: New Century Entertainment Corporation.
- Ghost*, 1990. Directed by Jerry Zucker. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*, 1966. Directed by Alan Rafkin. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Ghostbusters*, 1984. Directed by Ivan Reitman. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- Ginger Snaps*, 2000. Directed by John Fawcett. Canada/USA: Motion International.
- The Goonies*, 1985. Directed by Richard Donner. USA: Warner Bros. and Amblin Entertainment.
- Goosebumps*, 2015. Directed by Rob Letterman. USA/Australia: Columbia Pictures.
- Gremlins*, 1984. Directed by Joe Dante. USA: Warner Bros. and Amblin Entertainment.
- Halloween*, 1978. Directed by John Carpenter. USA: Compass International Pictures.
- Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 2005. Directed by Mike Newell. UK/USA: Warner Bros. and Heyday Films.
- The Haunted House*, 1929. Directed by Walt Disney. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- The Haunted Mansion*, 2003. Directed by Rob Minkoff. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Haunters of the Deep*, 1984. Directed by Andrew Bogle. UK: Children's Film and Television Foundation.
- Hell's Bells*, 1929. Directed by Ub Iwerks. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Hocus Pocus*, 1993. Directed by Kenny Ortega. USA: Walt Disney Studios.
- The Hole*, 2009. Directed by Joe Dante. USA: Bold Films.
- Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, 1992. Directed by Chris Columbus. USA: Hughes Entertainment and Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
- Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, 1989. Directed by Joe Johnston. USA/Mexico: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Hotel Transylvania*, 2012. Directed by Genndy Tartakovsky. USA: Sony Pictures Animation.
- Hotel Transylvania 2*, 2015. Directed by Genndy Tartakovsky. USA: Sony Pictures Animation.
- The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1923. Directed by Wallace Worsley. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Igor*, 2008. Directed by Anthony Leondis. USA/France: Exodus Productions.

- Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, 1984. Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Lucasfilm.
- The Innocents*, 1961. Directed by Jack Clayton. USA/UK: Achilles and Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
- Interview with the Vampire*, 1994. Directed by Neil Jordan. USA: Geffen Pictures.
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956. Directed by Don Siegel. USA: Walter Wanger Productions.
- It's Alive*, 1974. Directed by Larry Cohen. USA: Warner Bros. and Larco Productions.
- Jerry Maguire*, 1996. Directed by Cameron Crowe. USA: TriStar Pictures and Gracie Films.
- The Karate Kid*, 1984. Directed by John G. Avildsen. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, Jerry Weintraub Productions and Delphi Films.
- Kubo and the Two Strings*, 2016. Directed by Travis Knight. USA: Laika Entertainment.
- Labyrinth*, 1986. Directed by Jim Henson. UK/USA: The Jim Henson Company.
- La Leyenda de la Llorona/The Legend of La Llorona*, 2011. Directed by Alberto Rodriguez. Mexico: *Ánima Estudios* and *Eficine 226*.
- La Leyenda de las Momias/The Legend of the Mummies*, 2014. Directed by Alberto Rodriguez. Mexico: *Ánima Estudios*.
- La Leyenda de la Nahuala/The Legend of Nahuala*, 2007. Directed by Ricardo Arnaiz. Mexico: *Animex Producciones* and *Fidecine*.
- The Legend of Hell House*, 1973. Directed by John Hough. UK: Academy Pictures Corporation.
- The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, 1949. Directed by Clyde Geronimi and Jack Kinney. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- The LEGO Batman Movie*, 2017. Directed by Chris McKay. Denmark/USA: Warner Bros.
- The LEGO Movie*, 2014. Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Australia/USA/Denmark: Warner Bros.
- Little Monsters*, 1989. Directed by Richard Alan Greenberg. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- The Little Vampire*, 2000. Directed by Uli Edel. Germany/Netherlands/USA: Propaganda Films and Cometstone Productions.
- The Lost Boys*, 1987. Directed by Joel Schumacher. USA: Warner Bros.
- Mad Monster Party*, 1967. Directed by Jules Bass. USA: Rankin/Bass Productions.
- The Man from Nowhere*, 1975. Directed by James Hill. UK: Children's Film and Television Foundation.
- Meet the Parents*, 2000. Directed by Jay Roach. USA: Universal Pictures.
- A Monster Calls*, 2016. Directed by J.A. Bayona. USA/Spain/UK: River Road Entertainment.
- Monster High: Frights, Camera, Action!*, 2014. Directed by William Lau and Sylvain Blais. USA: Playground Productions.

- Monster High: Ghouls Rule!*, 2012. Directed by Mike Fetterly and Steve Sacks. USA: Mattel Entertainment.
- Monster High: New Ghoul at School*, 2010. Directed by Audu Paden and Eric Radomski. USA: Mattel Entertainment and WildBrain Animation Studios.
- Monster House*, 2006. Directed by Gil Kenan. USA: Columbia Pictures.
- The Monster Squad*, 1987. Directed by Fred Dekker. USA: TAFT Entertainment Pictures.
- Monsters, Inc.* 2001. Directed by Pete Docter, Silverman and Lee Unkrich. USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1932. Directed by Robert Florey. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Near Dark*, 1987. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. USA: F/M and Near Dark Joint Venture.
- The Nightmare Before Christmas*, 1993. Directed by Henry Selick. USA: Touchstone Pictures.
- A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984. Directed by Wes Craven. USA: New Line Cinema.
- The Omen*, 1976. Directed by Richard Donner. UK/USA: Twentieth Century-Fox and Mace Neufeld Productions.
- Orphan*, 2009. Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra. USA/Canada/Germany: Dark Castle Entertainment.
- Out of the Darkness*, 1985. Directed by John Krish. UK: Children's Film and Television Foundation.
- Paperhouse*, 1988. Directed by Bernard Rose. UK: Working Title Films.
- ParaNorman*, 2012. Directed by Chris Butler and Sam Fell. USA: Laika Entertainment.
- The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006. Directed by Sophie Fiennes. UK/Austria/Netherlands: Amoeba Film and Mischief Films.
- The Phantom of the Opera*, 1925. Directed by Rupert Julian. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Pinocchio*, 1911. Directed by Giulio Antamoro. Italy: Società Italiana Cines.
- Pinocchio*, 1940. Directed by Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Poltergeist*, 1982. Directed by Tobe Hooper. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Porky's*, 1981. Directed by Bob Clark. Canada/USA: Melvin Simon Productions and Astral Bellevue Pathe Inc.
- Psycho*, 1960. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Shamley Productions.
- Rebecca*, 1940. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Selznick International Pictures.
- Return of the Jedi*, 1983. Directed by Richard Marquand. USA: Lucasfilm.
- Rosemary's Baby*, 1968. Directed by Roman Polanski. USA: William Castle Productions.
- Saw*, 2004. Directed by James Wan. USA: Twisted Pictures.
- Shrek*, 2001. Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. USA: DreamWorks Animation.

- The Sixth Sense*, 1999. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. USA: The Kennedy/Marshall Company.
- The Skeleton Dance*, 1929. Directed by Walt Disney. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937. Directed by David Hand. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Something Wicked This Way Comes*, 1983. Directed by Jack Clayton. USA: Walt Disney Productions and Bryna Productions.
- Star Wars*, 1977. Directed by George Lucas. USA: Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox.
- Teen Wolf*, 1985. Directed by Rod Daniel. USA: Wolfkill.
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974. Directed by Tobe Hooper. USA: Vortex.
- This Film is Not Yet Rated*, 2006. Directed by Kirby Dick. UK/USA: IFC.
- Too Smart for Strangers*, 1985. Directed by Philip F. Messina and Ron Underwood. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- To Please a Lady*, 1950. Directed by Clarence Brown. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Toy Story*, 1995. Directed by John Lasseter. USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Tron*, 1982. Directed by Steven Lisberger. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, 2011. Directed by Bill Condon. USA: Summit Entertainment.
- The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, 2012. Directed by Bill Condon. USA: Summit Entertainment.
- Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship & Videotape*, 2010. Directed by Jake West. UK: Nucleus Films.
- Village of the Damned*, 1960. Directed by Wolf Rilla. UK: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios.
- Village of the Damned*, 1995. Directed by John Carpenter. USA: Universal Pictures and Alphaville Films.
- The Visit*, 2015. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. USA: Blinding Edge Pictures and Blumhouse Productions.
- Wallace & Gromit in The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, 2005. Directed by Steve Box and Nick Park. UK/USA: Aardman Animations and DreamWorks Animation.
- The Watcher in the Woods*, 1980. Directed by John Hough. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Watership Down*, 1978. Directed by Martin Rosen. UK: Duncan Studio.
- What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 1962. Directed by Robert Aldrich. USA: Warner Bros.
- The Willies*, 1990. Directed by Brian Peck. USA: Force Majeure Productions.
- The Witches*, 1990. Directed by Nicolas Roeg. UK/USA: The Jim Henson Company.
- The Wizard of Oz*, 1939. Directed by Victor Fleming. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.



## Teleography

- Camberwick Green*, 1966. Created by Gordon Murray. UK: Gordon Murray Puppets Production.
- The Clangers*, 1969-74. Created by Oliver Postgate. UK: Smallfilms.
- Count Duckula*, 1988-93. Created by Brian Cosgrove and Mark Hall. UK: Cosgrove Hall Films.
- Dynasty*, 1981-89. Created by Esther Shapiro and Richard Alan Shapiro. USA: Aaron Spelling Productions.
- Frankenstein's Cat*, 2008. Created by Curtis Jobling. UK/France: Mackinnon & Saunders and Kayenta Production.
- Groovie Goolies*, 1970-71. Directed by Hal Sutherland. USA: Filmation.
- Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids*, 1999-. Created by Jamie Rix. UK: Grizzly TV.
- Medium*, 2005-11. Created by Glenn Gordon Caron. USA: Picturemaker Productions and Gramnet Productions.
- Mona the Vampire*, 1999-2003. Created by Sonia Holleyman. Canada: Gaumont-Alphanim.
- Moomin*, 1990-91. Produced by Kazuo Tabata and Dennis Livson. Japan/Finland/Netherlands: TV Tokyo.
- Portlandia*, 2011-. Created by Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein and Jonathan Krisel. USA: Broadway Video Entertainment.
- Saturday Night Live*, 1975-. Created by Lorne Michaels. USA: NBC Universal Television.
- Scooby Doo, Where Are You!*, 1969-70. Created by Joe Ruby and Ken Spears. USA: Hanna-Barbera Productions.
- The Simpsons*, 1989-. Created by James L. Brooks, Matt Groening and Sam Simon. USA: Gracie Films and 20th Century Fox Television.
- Stephen King's It*, 1990. Directed by Tommy Lee Wallace. USA/Canada: Green/Epstein Productions, Konigsberg/Sanitsky Company, Lorimar Television and Warner Bros. Television.