

Conclusion

Abstract

The conclusion reflects upon how the millennial turn represented a moment of historical uncertainty and transition, and incited a renewed consideration of what the child ‘means’ to existing cultural and epistemological frameworks of futurity and progress.

Keywords: Uncanny child, Futurity, Children’s culture, Millennial turn

The myriad uncanny children who stared out from and erupted through our screens during the millennial turn herald our shifting sense of what the child means to adult-sanctioned narratives of personal and national identity. By harnessing the temporally dissonant mechanisms of traumatic experience, these figures endow the innocent and benign ‘sleep of reason’, which Rousseau famously placed at the core of our understandings of childhood, with potent, monstrous charge. To return to the words of Goya, ‘the sleep of reason produces monsters’. It is this deeply uncanny subversion of childhood innocence that structures all of the films analysed throughout this book. These children do not simply vacillate between innocence and its opposite, evil. Instead, they enact a dialectic movement between *heimlich* to *unheimlich* from *within* the bounds of childhood’s traditional definition – as innocent, naïve other to adulthood’s knowledgeable, powerful rationality – exposing the uneasiness usually veiled beneath conventional understandings of the child.

To emphasize the implications of this shift, I return to the work of Edelman and Stockton outlined in the Introduction. Edelman suggests doing away with our value in the child for the way it affirms current social structures and politics: ‘we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the child’ (2004, 11). Yet the transnational, millennial uncanny child cycle unravels the child’s entwinement with this narrow fantasy of the future. As Stockton suggests, ‘there are other ways to circumvent “the child.” One

could explore the elegant, unruly contours of growing that don't bespeak continuance' (2009, 13). The uncanny children of this transnational body of films enact the very 'moving suspensions and shadows of growth' (2009, 13) to which Stockton refers. In various ways, all of the figures discussed in this book empower the ideo-aesthetic properties of past traumas, a process that functions as a denial of 'futura's unquestioned value' (Edelman, 2004, 4), while serving narratively and aesthetically to underscore the adult protagonist's – and *viewer's* – disastrously belated recognition of the power, knowledge, and insight of the child. As a result, uncanny child characters refuse to fit within adult-centric models of childhood and temporal continuity, turning the very traumas inflicted upon them as a result of such ideology back upon adult society to rail against the child's overdrawn conceptual function.

Thus, the uncanny child plays out a burgeoning awareness of the impending obsolescence of long-standing modernist understandings of childhood that subjugate the child as 'innocent' and 'naïve', and which, as justified by this posited emptiness, force her to fit our own visions of social development and futurity. Yet, as Jenks suggests:

to abandon a shared category of the child is to confront a daunting paradox. If as adults we do just that, what happens to the concept of 'childhood', through which we, as adults, see ourselves and our society's past and future? If [...] the concept of 'childhood' serves to articulate not just the experience and status of the young within modern society but also the projections, aspirations, longings and altruism contained within the adult experience then to abandon such a conception is to erase our final point of stability and attachment to the social bond. In a historical era during which issues of identity and integration are, perhaps, both more unstable and more fragile than at any previous time such a loss would impact upon the everyday experience of societal members with disorienting consequences. (2005, 135)

These films express the feelings of dread and fear that accompany an ever-heightening realization at the turn of the millennium that the child – one of our key means of conceptualizing the relations between self and society, the individual and the collective, growth and cultural progress – can no longer function as an empty vessel for adult meaning. But these films also start to work through ways forward, by challenging hierarchical binaries of child and adult. The transnational films discussed in Section Four signal a period of baroque embellishment and self-reflexivity within the uncanny

child cycle. However, this by no means marked the end of the movement, but instead evidenced the start of a self-aware consideration of the significance of this trope as the 21st century progressed. Sequels, remakes, and reboots of many of the films discussed throughout this book have proliferated throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, including a remake of *POLTERGEIST* (*POLTERGEIST* [Gil Kenan, 2015]), three sequels to *INSIDIOUS* (*INSIDIOUS: CHAPTER 2* [James Wan, 2013], *INSIDIOUS: CHAPTER 3* [Leigh Whannell, 2015] and *INSIDIOUS: THE LAST KEY* [Adam Robitel, 2018]), two American sequels to *THE RING* (*THE RING TWO* [Hideo Nakata, 2005] and *RINGS* [F. Javier Gutiérrez, 2017]), and three Japanese sequels to the original *RING* cycle (*SADAKO 3D* [Tsutomu Hanabusa, 2012], *SADAKO 3D 2* [Hanabusa, 2012], and a *RING* and *JU-ON* crossover, *SADAKO VS KAYAKO* [Kōji Shiraishi, 2016]), to name but a few.

Yet, beyond the franchises these millennial uncanny child figures sparked, in the 2010s a recurring preoccupation with the power of children's culture has emerged in supernatural horror cinema, a theme that extends upon uncanny child cinema of the millennial turn. These films include *DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK* (Troy Nixey, 2010, US/Mexico), *MAMA* (Andrés Muschietti, 2013, Canada/Spain/US) – both of which were produced by Guillermo del Toro – *INTRUDERS* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2011, US/Spain/Britain), *SINISTER* (Scott Derrickson, 2012, US/Britain), and *THE BABADOOK* (Jennifer Kent, 2014, Australia/Canada). In all of these films, a bogeyman of the child's imagination, initially belittled or dismissed by the adult characters, comes to represent a direct threat not just to the children, but to the adult characters as well. These films thus enact a shift in the traditional power balance between children and their adult guardians, whereby 'childish' fears become adult ones – a subversion of the very connotations of childishness.

All of these films play out the fear that the supposedly fictional, 'childish' bogeymen of children's culture are slipping into the adult real in insidious ways, and that it is their very depiction in children's art and stories which functions as the channel for this slippage. Such a fixation is captured by some of the taglines of these films, which include 'Fear is Never Just Make Believe' (*DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK*), 'The Nightmare is Real' (*INTRUDERS*), 'Once you see him, nothing can save you' (*SINISTER*), and 'If it's in a word, or in a book, you can't get rid of The Babadook' (*THE BABADOOK*). These films suggest that adult culture's dismissal of the power of children's culture will be our undoing, allowing bogeymen to creep into our realities right under our noses, empowered through our very denial of their existence. This is made explicit in a recurring line in *THE BABADOOK*: 'The more you deny me, the stronger I get.' The sleep of reason produces monsters, but they overtly

become monsters not simply *of* childhood, but *shared* between child and adult, suggesting a renunciation of the empty inscrutability of childhood ‘innocence’ and thus the beginnings of a breakdown in the overdetermined binary separation between child and adult realms. This continuing pop-cultural preoccupation is further suggested by the recent emergence of self-reflexively nostalgic horror texts such as *It* (Muschietti, 2017) and the Netflix television show *STRANGER THINGS* (The Duffer Brothers, 2016–2017) that are child-centred – in terms of perspective, character, and culture – yet are ostensibly aimed at adult audiences. In different ways, all of these texts suggest the continued vitality and cultural magnitude of the uncanny child figure in the 2010s.

Ultimately, the millennial turn represented a felt moment of historical uncertainty and transition that incited a renewed consideration of what the child ‘means’ to existing social and conceptual frameworks – that is, *adult*, frameworks – of meaning and identity. Traumatized and victimized, the child figures that emerged during this period are captured breaking loose from their subjugated position, harnessing the powerful incoherence and temporal dissonance of their trauma to unseat the primacy of adult knowledge. The continued cultural fixation with uncanny children at the end of the second decade of the 21st century suggests the important cultural work this figure continues to perform. Initially a vision of cultural otherness that frighteningly exposed the tangled closeness and distance of child-adult conceptual relations, the uncanny child is gradually unravelling the very assumptions upon which this unbalanced dichotomy is constituted.

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